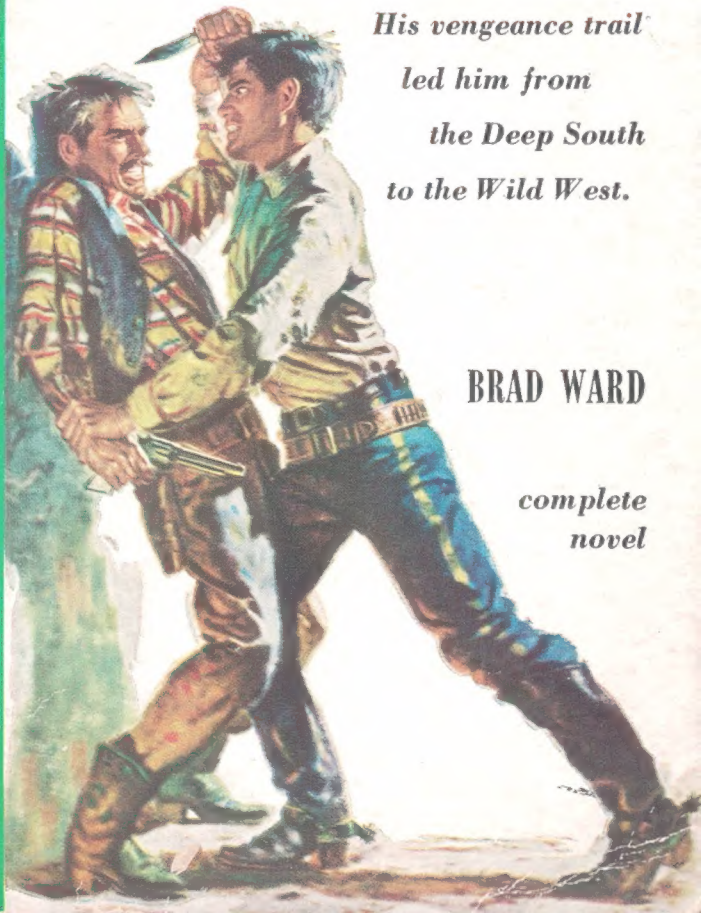
S-148 ACE 25¢ BOOKS

THE MAN FROM ANDERSONVILLE BRAD WARD

The Man From ANDERSONVILLE

His vengeance trail led him from the Deep South to the Wild West.



BRAD WARD

complete novel

HIS PRIVATE MISSION CAME FIRST

The rawness and violence of a Western boom-town was something that would faze many an Easterner, but it didn't hold any terrors for Hart Caven. For Hart had just been freed from the frightful prison camp of Andersonville and nothing would ever hold terror for him again.

The fact that a noted gun-slinger made the law in that gold camp and that he'd brought in every hardcase in Colorado Territory to back him up were just incidental to Hart's own implacable purpose.

So when the honest frontiersmen sought for a man to restore order to Thunder Rock, it was THE MAN FROM ANDERSONVILLE they chose. But first they had to prove to Hart that his own private vengeance would be served thereby.

About the Author:

In this, his latest novel, Brad Ward has tied in the authentic color of the Civil War's most notorious prison camp with the equally authentic picture of the booming, hell-roaring opening of the West that followed the end of the terrible conflict. Born and bred in the West, Brad Ward has long been a keen observer of its people and their lore, and he has incorporated into his books this knowledge, bringing it to life with the full embodiment of the fighting men and women of the old frontier.

Brad Ward in real life is Samuel A. Peeples, Police Commissioner of Daly City, California. Ace Books have published many of his exciting novels under both his real and his fictional signatures. Among them was *The Marshal of Medicine Bend,* recently released as a movie under the title *The Lonely Street.* Other Ace Books have included *The Hanging Hills, Johnny Sundance, Desert Showdown,* and *The Lobo Horseman.*

THE MAN from ANDERSONVILLE

BRAD WARD

ACE BOOKS
A Division of A. A. Wyn, Inc.
23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

THE MAN FROM ANDERSONVILLE

Copyright ©, 1956, by A. A. Wyn, Inc.

All Rights Reserved

To

DIANE and DOUGLAS CALVIN

With Sincere Affection

Printed in U.S.A.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DREAM was always the same; a boy's face, twisted with agony, his pale blue eyes begging for help that could not be given, his bone-thin hands clutching harshly at the man who held him in his arms, his tortured voice crying out: *"Help me, Hart—don't let me die! I'm afraid, Hart, so afraid!"*

And as always after the dream, Hart Caven awakened with his thin body shaking, his hands balled into fists so tightly the tendons in his forearms ached. The vision of the boy's face held steadily for a moment, then faded into the blur of memory, and Hart was fully conscious. He heard the rattling clamor of the freight train, the high-pitched squealing of brakes, then felt the forward jolting of his body as the trail slowed abruptly.

The nightmare of Andersonville Prison and the memory of his brother seemed stronger tonight, harder to force back into the unreality of memory. One dirt-grimed hand came up before the huddled man's light-hued eyes and his lips whispered a name: "Davey." Then he shook his head and shrugged his shoulders to ease the ache in them. The interior of the wooden boxcar was dark but outside the open sliding doors he saw the rain-blurred flash of a signal lamp. Far ahead the whistle of the locomotive keened wailingly.

The train was coming into a freight yard. Hart climbed wearily to his feet, his half-starved body protesting at every movement, and crossed to the open door. He watched the odd pattern of the yard lights and felt the cold wetness of rain whip into his face. He shivered against the bite of the cold wind and drew his tattered coat closer about him. In the sudden flaring light of a red lantern his face was lean, the white mark of a scar standing out across his forehead. His left hand made the unconscious gesture of passing before his eyes again as he turned away from the open door and returned to the dark interior of the freight car.

He groped blindly for his bedroll, found it and swung it across his shoulders by the rope that bound it. He returned to the open door and leaned against one side, staring out into the dark, rain-lashed night. The train lurched and slowed again. The shrilling whistle cut through the rattling din of the steel wheels.

The railroad police would shake down the freight train as it came into the yards. Hart did not relish the thought of being caught. In the turbulent surge of industry that had followed the Civil War, there was no room and no consideration for those who had lost their way. Or maybe only for those who would not forget their hate and anger. . . .

Above the noise of the train's passage he caught the thudding of feet on the narrow walkway atop the car and instantly swung down and held there by the grip of his hands. Then a harsh voice shouted at him and he let go, his legs running hard before he struck. He felt the bite of the ground, balanced for a moment, his legs churning, then his foot slipped in the gumbo mud and he fell headlong, scraping a furrow in the soft muck beside the twin lines of track, only inches from the racketing wheels of the train. He lay there half-stunned, and then the roaring noise was gone and he saw the twin red lights of the caboose receding in the distance, their glowing limning the two steel ribbons.

For a moment he lay still, breathing hard. The rain was a steady cold pattering against his body. The melancholy wail of the locomotive whistle came drifting back to him, then the only sound was the steady drumming of rain. He pushed himself erect, slick with mud, and chilled to the bone. He wiped his face with his hands, then stiffened as the ruby glow of a fire came out of the night from off to the left. He watched its steady flickering for a moment, then then started toward it, limping slightly as a result of his fall.

The fire burned in the shelter of a high wooden trestle that spanned a deep ravine. He clambered down the steep bank

of the wash awkwardly, using his hands to steady himself and caught the swift sound of rushing water below him in the darkness as the small red gleam of the fire touched the white-churned water. Just beyond the perimeter of the firelight he stopped and hitched his bundle higher across his shoulders. He whistled shrilly three sharp notes and waited. Then a man's coarse voice came out of the darkness.

"All right, friend, we see you. Come on in."

Hart Caven limped forward to pause in front of the fire. It was purposely small, and shielded from the falling rain by the timbers of the trestle that shot gauntly up into the darkness. On a log that was half-buried in the mud of the ravine slope facing the fire sat three men. They were dressed in raggle-taggled remnants of uniforms and all three were dark and bearded. Their clothes were dark with rain and worn and stained fron wear, but once they had been gray—and for an instant old hate flared, and a pulse beat rapidly at the base of Hart's neck before he forced the emotion under control. He had been disappointed in his search too many times to build up in his mind the chance that any of these might be one of the men he was seeking. The odds against it were impossibly large;—three men out of more than a million who had once worn the gray of the Confederacy. But vengenance is a master who ignores impossibilities and thrives on even the remotest chance. Caven's mouth straightened into a hard, thin line.

A man beside the fire lifted his head. "No grub an' no coffee," he said, bluntly. "An' damn' little heat from that stinkin' excuse for a fire—but you're welcome to it."

"Hell of a night," another man grunted. "Goddamn, what a hell of a night."

"I've seen worse." the man in the middle said. In the firelight his face beneath his greying beard was seamed and lined.

"Me, too, durin' the war," the third man put in. "But it ain't the same. You maybe didn't know what you was doin'

or where you was goin', but just the same you knew damned well that *somebody* knew."

"Or thought they did," the first man cut in. He laughed, harshily and lifted his head to stare at Hart. "Hey, friend, you ain't no Johnny Reb."

Hart shook his head. "Michigan Brigade," he said.

The first man laughed again. "Custer's own," he said. "If you followed him into the Third Cavalry Division, you chased my tail for nine days from Five Forks. Crazy bastard, Georgey Custer—should've been a Reb."

Hart closed his eyes but did not reply. He had not ridden with the golden-haired Custer at Five Forks. He'd been taken at Yellow Tavern months before and had spent those months in Andersonville Military Prison. Davey had been taken prisoner with him, but his brother had been one of the thousands who filled the trench-graves at Andersonville—graves the living prisoners, those able to stand and work, had been forced to dig. Grim lines deepened at the sides of Hart's broad mouth.

He stirred to throw some wet wood on the fire. It smoked, stinging their eyes until they watered. The man next to him began to cough. They lapsed into tired silence as heat finally broke through. In the distance a train whistle shrilled. The rain had now steadied to a heavy drizzle. The sizzling spatter of it in the fire lulled his mind, and Hart felt himself dozing, his head slumping forward to his chest.

A train rumbled over the trestle, shaking it violently, and Hart awakened with a start. The other three stirred. The fire was almost out and Hart gathered more wood from a loose pile to one side and laid it carefully on the fire. The train receded into the distance with a final piercing cry of its whistle.

Loose dirt and mud slid down into the gully to splash into the creek below. Hart turned to see the thick figure of a man come sliding down from the tracks above. The man dug his feet into the mud to slow his downward movement and came erect. He was big, the firelight shining on the wet

poncho that covered his broad shoulders. He came into the firelight grinning. His face was beard-stubbled, round and heavy of feature, his eyes small and dark and closely set. He rubbed one dirty paw of a hand across his mouth before shambling forward.

Something about the gesture, an unconscious habit, struck home to Hart, and he felt his stomach churn with building excitement. He knew the man instantly, and he came to his feet and balanced there. A name twisted his mouth: *"Farley!"*

The big man saw Hart's movement, and he paused uncertainly, his grin dying. Then Hart's face came clear in the ruddy burst of fire that shot up from the smoldering wet wood, and Farley sprang backward, one hand digging beneath the folds of his poncho.

"Stay away from me, damn you, Caven!" he yelled, but Hart was moving forward, shoulders hunched, his face gone gray, his blue eyes cold fires of hate.

For an instant Farley stood there, his heavy face working, and then his arm jerked viciously and orange-red flame lanced out toward Hart. A bullet tugged at the skirt of Hart's coat, and behind him one of the men yelled in fear and he caught the sound of swift scurrying as they broke for cover. The second roaring shot followed the first by an instant, but the big man was backing away too hurriedly to be accurate and the shot was wasted. Hart's right hand went to his waist and came up, the firelight shining along the silvery edge of a knife. He held it in his fist, point up, and moved in slowly.

In the darkness before him the gun blasted again, then feet slogged in the mud, scrambling up the steep slope. Hart came forward, not hurrying. The churning of his stomach had given way to a cold, hard knot that bound all emotion into one seething hate.

"It's too late to run, Farley!" Hart bit out.

The only reply was another wasted shot that struck the timbers of the trestle and ricocheted screechingly off into the night. Somewhere close a train whistled, and the blinding

white glare of its headlamp sliced through the rainy blackness. Outlined against it was the scrambling shape of the big man, striving frantically to reach the roadbed above. He slipped, came downward a few feet and yelped in fright. Finally his driving feet caught purchase in the slippery mud, and he lurched upward again. Hart followed more quickly, the driving force that held him making the effort almost easy. Ahead of him the big man had topped the gully and was running for the trestle.

Hart followed more slowly. In the distance the train was rumbling nearer, its whistle splitting the night with noise. The glare of the headlamp was closer now, a great white beacon shining through the rain. Hart saw the man Farley again who had reached the trestle and swung up on a cross-piece. He missed his hold, fell back, then frantically scrambled up onto it and moved away. Hart came up to him, caught hold of the cross-brace and climbed onto the wooden girder. The light of the oncoming locomotive bathed them both in the white brilliance of its headlamp, shining on Hart's bone-thin, terrible face, and Farley's stricken features.

"Get back! Get back!" Farley screamed. He saw the shine of the knife in Hart's hand as his gun blasted twice, futilely.

Hart came driving forward, and Farley backed desperately. He threw his gun which struck Hart in the face. Hart paused and wiped at the bruised cheek with his free hand.

"It's not like it was in Andersonville now, is it, Farley?" he demanded, harshly. "No more half-dead men to bully and to beat with your stick. No dog pack to set upon runaways to tear them to bloody bits, no more barbed wire and guns to protect you. It's just you and me, now, Farley!"

Hart held there. He was in no hurry now. The long months were behind him, and in front of him was one of three men he had sworn to kill. The knowledge was quieting him, stilling the quivering of his body.

"Remember Davey, Farley?" he asked. "Remember the dying kid you beat until he lay like a dead man in the muck

of the compound? The sores across his back crawled with maggots when he died, Farley. I can't pay you back for that," he whispered, *"but I can kill you!"*

He moved in quickly, and Farley scrambled back with a shrill cry of terror. "No! For God's sake, Caven—" His back struck an upright pillar and he bounced forward. Instantly Hart closed in, his left arm and shoulder pinning the bigger man to the upright while his right hand swung back for **a killing blow with the knife.**

The train screamed shrilly as it struck the trestle. The wooden framework jarred and shook, and at that moment Farley surged desperately forward, driving Hart off-balance before he could complete the knife-stroke. Farley pulled back, twisting away, trying to get around the pillar, but Hart's hands caught him and spun him around as the train thundered **overhead and was gone.**

"I'm going to kill you, Farley!" Hart gritted. "But first you're going to talk—you're going to tell me where Dolman and Thaddus are." The long steel blade hung between them, the point a scant inch from Farley's body. "Where are they, Farley? Answer me, damn you, before I gut you!"

The frightened, pasty face of the big man stared into his own. "West," he shrilled. "Colorado Territory—Thaddus's in Denver—doin' good I heard—an' Dolman's somewhere out there, too. I been tryin' to find 'em—they owe me something—"

"Not as much as they owe me!" Hart cut in savagely. He held there, the killing fury still working in him. Farley read the intent in those terrible blue eyes and screamed out.

"No! I've told you everything I know, Caven. You've got to let me go—you've got to—" He seized that moment to make his break, lunging forward crazily, his chest striking **Hart, hurling him back.**

Hart's foot slipped on the wet wood, and he swayed sickeningly, felt himself falling. He twisted like a cat to catch the narrow wooden brace on which he stood. It caught him across the chest as he fell and he held there. He saw

Farley, sudden triumph lighting his beard-stubbled face as he came forward at a run, foot driving to smash Hart's hold and send him hurtling from the heights of the trestle to the racing water far below.

Hart caught a hold, swung his body up and lashed out with his feet at the oncoming man. The blow caught Farley full in the chest, and the bigger man's forward lunge was stopped. He teetered on the narrow beam, fear raging, twisting his face. Then like a figure in a nightmare, he fell slowly backward into the rainy obscurity of the night, his final wailing cry cut off abruptly.

"That's one of them, Davey," Hart Caven whispered. Still he stood there, staring into nothingness, and then he turned, slowly. It was over for Farley—but there were still two more, Dolman and Thaddus. His mouth straightened grimly and he said, softly: "Colorado Territory." He considered the thought, then nodded. For the first time in more that a year he had more than just purpose to guide him, and it was with a renewed determination that he moved back along the wooden girder, gained the muddy bank of the gully and scrambled up toward the tracks above.

CHAPTER TWO

He eased his weight in the wooden seat, and stretched his long legs carefully. Restlessness was beginning to stir within him, for the dark blue smudge directly to the west marked the end of what had seemed an eternity of prairie. To the north, south and east stretched the great flatlands, undulating in scarcely perceivable waves to three horizons. But now that flat immensity came to an end with the growing bulk of mountains to the west, and beneath a lowering cloud of yellow dust stood the mud-walled beginnings of a town where the South Platte met Cherry Creek.

"Denver," the driver yelled above the racket of the freighters' wagon. "Ugliest goddamn hole on the face o' the

earth but after three shots o' Taos Lightnin' who gives a damn?"

Hart relaxed on the spring seat, letting his buttocks take the hard jolting of the rutted road. His eyes remained fixed on the low-lying little town ahead, then he became aware of the driver's stare and swivelled his head to meet it.

"Talkative bastard, ain't you?" the man demanded.

"When there's something to say," Caven answered.

The other man grunted and spat a brown gob of tobacco juice over the far side of the wagon. "Hell, I don't mind if a feller's got things on his mind. I seen worse. Rode nine days with a feller once that never said a word—found out later he'd had his tongue cut out by Comanches for stealin' a squaw."

Caven let his eyes return to the dust-blurred town. The dust storm had settled lower, almost blotting out the buildings. Beyond that yellow cloud lay the Rockies and the gold camps. If not in Denver, then in one or another of the camps he would find the men he sought, and then . . . The thought ended there unpleasantly as it always did. After he found Dolman and Thaddus, what then? He forced the hardness of the thought away as he had so often before.

The town, lying between the two forks of the rivers, grew closer, and within two hours the lumbering freighter was making its dust-churning way down the length of Blake Street, the new town's principle thoroughfare. Sod-walled buildings rubbed shoulders with new green-lumber frame structures. What few glass windows were in existence were criss-crossed with tiny scratches from the dust storms, and coated with a film of yellow grime. But the town was neither sleepy nor indolent; there was a harsh rawness, a vital striving that permeated it. It was reflected in the constant stream of wagons, freighters and ore wagons that traversed the street that had been churned by their wheels into a powdery sea of golden dust.

The freighter carrying Hart rolled past the empty log and mud Eldorado Hotel, now a warehouse, and past an endless

array of gambling halls and saloons to draw up, finally, before a squarish frame structure two stories high and fronted by a broad portico that bore a faded black-lettered sign: DENVER HOUSE.

"There's the dog-bitten Elephant Corral," the driver said, spitting over the side of the rolling wagon. "I'll dump this rig at Kelly's an' be back in an hour. If you're still here, I'll buy you a drink."

Hart Caven stiffened. "Thanks," he said, and slung his bedroll over one shoulder before stepping out of the deep bed of the wagon to one monstrous wheel, then to the thick hub and from there to the ground. The driver spat again, swung his whip and the team lurched forward. The mammoth wheels began to turn again, sucking up the yellow dust.

Hart moved to the boardwalk, hoisted the bedroll higher on his shoulder, and watched his erstwhile companion roll away down the hot and crowded street. For a moment he stood there, eyes narrowed, surveying the town. His first impression of Denver was of a great, sprawling brown bug, treeless and dirt dry, with a steady wind that whipped sand through it, but filled, nonetheless, with an urgent vitality that would not die. It was a mark in the bearded faces of the men who moved past him; it was a part of the fact he had yet to see a woman upon the street; it was an inate sense of being alive, of growing steadily. He had seen other boomtowns, but none as poorly situated, as arid, as Denver, and yet he had a feeling that the town would not die as had so many others.

Hart fingered the hardness of the single silver dollar in the pocket of his linsey-woolen britches, and studied the fronts of the buildings opposite him. He saw five saloons and three assay offices, and down past the corner the false front of a livery stable. He frowned, then stepped down into the yellow street and crossed between rolling wagons to the far side and the Fair Chance Palace. It was less ornate than most of the other gambling halls, and there was no barker outside

drumming up trade. He pushed past the swinging doors and the warm, moist air of the place closed about him. It was sweltering inside and smelled of sour beer, but after the glare of the sun the shade was welcome.

Aside from five men grouped about a green-topped poker table, the hall was empty. Behind the long bar that ran the length of the room a single bartender was drying glasses and setting them up on the backbar. The man was short and thickset, and his eyes went quickly to Hart's face. Then he grinned and nodded. Damp bar towels covered the free lunch at the end of the bar keeping away the flies in anticipation of the evening trade of cowboys, miners and freighters who would fill the place to overflowing.

A sixth man caught Hart's eye. A blank-faced gambler sat on a high stool behind a blackjack table against one wall, idly flipping a pack of cards. Hart watched the careless movements of the gambler's fingers for a moment, then rubbed at his cheek. He hesitated. An imperceptible shrug moved his shoulders and he crossed to the blackjack table and laid his last dollar on the oilcloth covering the table.

"High card?" Hart queried.

The blank-faced man let his colorless eyes come to Hart's beard-stubbled face. For a moment he studied the hard features of the waiting man, then shrugged and set out the deck.

"It's your dollar," he said. Their eyes met and locked. The gambler's smile was a sneer.

Hart ignored it and shrugged the bedroll from his shoulder, set it down beside his right foot. He put out one lean brown hand, fingered the deck. His fingers seemed merely to touch the edges, then he shuffled, rather awkwardly, set the deck down and waited. The gambler's sneer became more apparent. He cut a queen. Hart's thin hand moved out, and without seeming to hesitate flipped over a king. The gambler looked up quickly into Hart's face, but laid a silver dollar beside the first one.

"Your poison," he said, with a flat voice.

"I'll take the same," Hart answered, and smiled.

The gambler riffled the cards smoothly, laid them out. His colorless eyes followed the movement of Hart's hand as he cut. Hart laid the ace of Diamonds face up on the table and continued to smile. The gambler hesitated, his hand on the deck, his fingers moving restlessly up and down the sides of the pack. Then he made his cut without seeming to delay. It was the three of hearts.

The gambler laid two more silver dollars beside the two in front of Hart. His eyes moved restlessly. "We'll have a clean deck, friend," he said, and reached under the table.

The quick hardness of Hart's voice stopped the movement as he said: "I didn't ask for one. Leave them lay. I like a dirty deck."

The gambler's eyes moved uncertainly, then shifted toward the bar. Hart caught the movement and his smile deepened. The bartender made a sign and the gambler shrugged. A chair scraped and a man came to stand behind Hart, not too close.

"Sudden death," the newcomer said. "Mind if I watch, stranger?"

Hart shook his head. His smile stayed with the gambler. "My shuffle," he said. "Double is hard. Triple is harder. We'll try it, friend."

His thin hands carressed the cards. They moved almost of their own volition. The uncolored eyes of the man behind the blackjack table shot frantically toward the bartender, then came helplessly back.

After five cuts the gambler had a film of sweat across his pale brow. Hart's smile remained the same, but there were six golden double eagles and eight silver dollars lying on the brightly-colored oilcloth. One hundred and twenty-eight dollars won in less than five minutes. The card table stood empty behind Hart and the men who had been playing stood around, watching and grinning.

Hart shuffled, laid the deck on the table and waited. The gambler's hand trembled as he reached for it and his

eyes darted frantically toward the man behind the bar. He made his cut, turned a king, and relaxed on the stool.

Hart took his time. The man standing directly behind him said, kindly: "Ten to one he cuts an ace, even money it's a red one."

Hart asked: "Will you make that bet with me, friend?"

A laugh went up. The gambler fumbled in his cuff and Hart's right hand lifted clear of the table, poised, then settled over the desk as the gambler brought forth a kerchief to mop his sweating face. Without visible hesitation, Hart made his cut; it was the ace of clubs.

The gambler dug hard money from his tray and laid it out with an air of desperation. Then men moved from behind Hart and he turned to face the thick-set bartender who came forward smiling.

"You've had your fun, friend," the man said. "Now the game is closed."

A man behind Hart, a miner by his garb, said: "What the hell? Since when do you close a game?"

The bartender kept smiling. "Since now. Drinks are on the house. Midlan, take a walk. You need air." The gambler got up, still mopping at his face.

Trouble held in balance there, standing on Hart's decision to speak. The men who stood behind him would act as he acted; in this he was one of them. The bartender knew it, too, but his smile did not change. There was amusement behind his eyes, and something more, as if the man expected something from Hart, as if they shared some humorous secret between them the others could not know. Hart hesitated, then his smile matched the bartender's, and he scraped his winnings into a pile and stacked it neatly.

"Maybe you're right," Hart said. "I can use a drink."

The tension slacked out as silently as it had grown taut. The bartender nodded at Hart, and closed one eye in a careful wink. Still grinning, the thickset man moved back to the bar. The men behind Hart waited for him to move.

He pocketed his winnings except for a single double eagle, and this he laid atop the bar.

"I'm buying the round," he said. He walked to the end of the bar, pulled away the jar travel from the cold lunch and built himself a thick sandwich, which he ate slowly, chewing the food carefully. The bartender set a glass of beer on the bar.

"Bulgut's no good on an empty belly," he said, his voice friendly. "Try this on for size."

Hart sipped the beer. The men lined up at the bar drank their whisky. The bottles were set up and left and the bartender returned to mop at the bar in front of Hart.

"Double-nicking is good, too good for pennies," the thick-set man said. "But by doing it in public you've killed me in Denver, friend. I'll be moving on before tonight." He was still smiling. "That time always comes, and I don't really mind. I've had my stay here. When I leave I'll be forgotten. But that doesn't go for Al Midlan. He'll be marked from now on. He'll be called every time his hand slips, every time he wins, and God help him if they find a crimped deck. It's something that follows a man. Midlan will find that out, and he'll look for you, friend."

"It happens that way," Hart returned. He swallowed the last of his beer and made a second sandwich. The gold piece he had put on the bar was untouched. "Now I'll have that drink."

The bartender was watching him closely, the same odd expression in his eyes. "Hard," the bartender said, finally. "I've seen it before, but there are two kinds of hardness. Rock breaks, steel doesn't. Which are you, friend?"

"It will take a hammer to find out, *friend*," Hart replied.

Their eyes met and locked and then the bartender smiled again. He set up a black bottle. "My own," he said. "The name's Gimpler—Miles Gimpler, out of Natchez and New Orleans before all hell broke loose on the river."

"Hart Cayes," Hart said in turn. "We sat at opposite sides of the table. Infantry for me. Where I lived and what

I believed didn't match suits." Gimpler looked down the bar. Two of the other men had left the saloon. "Now it begins," he observed, dryly. "Maybe you'll find that hammer, friend Gaven. Meantime, those two hands of yours are worth a pile of gold."

"And a bullet in the head," Hart returned. "I had time to learn the tricks. I haven't time to play them against those who don't know them."

Gimpler studied him for a moment, then shrugged and moved away. Hart finished the second sandwich, drank his drink. Gimpler came back, removed his dirty-bellied apron and laid it across the bar. The last of the five men who had watched Hart play went through the swinging doors.

"And that, friend, is that," Gimpler said. "Those five will spread the word through Denver in one night. Every man who ever lost a stake here will damn me for running a crooked table. Not that I blame them. I did." Gimpler chuckled wryly.

"Do you want me to say I'm sorry?" Hart asked, quietly.

Gimpler met his eyes evenly, still smiling. "Hell, no. I play them the way they fall. No hard feelings. You skin a thousand sheep, and then the last one turns out to be a bear. Do you blame the bear?"

His shrewd black eyes studied Hart's face carefully. "I still say you're letting a hell of a good talent go to waste. If you change your mind, or you can't find a pigeon who thinks he knows something about crimping a deck, look me up. The name might not always be the same, but the face will. Try Thunder Rock—there's been a new strike there, and the word is that it's good. I've heard it said the whole damned world passes through Denver in the course of time—but right now the whole world is *in* Nevada Gulch and Thunder Rock."

He went past Hart, through a door into the back of the saloon. Hart frowned at the backbar, then went outside. The three-day emptiness was gone, replaced by a sodden fullness. He stood on the edge of the boardwalk and a man

came up, paused before passing through the swinging doors. It was the tall, lean gambler, Al Midian. His white face was crooked, his colorless eyes oddly smoke-hued. For an instant hate burned out at Hart, then the gambler pushed through into the Fair Chance.

"*He'll make his try—and I'll have to kill him,*" Hart thought. Then he shook his head. Even the hard finality of the knowledge meant very little to him. It was but another facet of the hard way he had chosen. He stepped out into the golden dust and crossed the street.

CHAPTER THREE

THERE WERE ninety-one saloons and gambling halls in Denver, and during the course of the following seven hours, Hart Caven visited them all. He didn't drink, and he didn't gamble, keeping to himself, unnoticed in the growing mob of men who crowded the streets as glaring sunlight gave way to lengthening shadows. He took time out once to eat at a beanery, and he wolfed his food in silence, spent ten minutes over coffee, then was on his way once more. He felt a building edge of excitment as he made his way, but as time passed, it was honed thin. He shrugged away the feeling and finally called off his quest for the night. The men he sought were not in Denver—or if they were he hadn't recognized them.

Theis last thought gnawed at him. Could a man hate someone enough to kill them when he wasn't even certain he could identify them by sight? Dr. Leo Dolman and Captain Keenan Thaddus—he tried to put faces to names and failed. Dolman he had never heard speak, although he had seen him close once, the day Hart had carried Davey in his arms to the infirmary at Andersonville. Raging with fever himself, he recalled a tall man, heavily bearded, a dirty, blood-begrimed gray uniform. But the details were vague, uncertain. Thaddus had been in charge of his sector of the

compound, a nondescript man sporting burnsides that squared his face. But out of uniform, with the burnsides shaved off—any of a hundred men he had seen that day could have been Keenan Thaddus.

It made a mark within him, a scalding soreness that ate away the bitterness, coated it with futility. For a moment he held there, enjoying the doubt, and then he deliberately closed his eyes, forced himself to remember Davey. Hart had taken him to the infirmary after a beating by the brutal Sergeant Farley—and Davey had died the next night after he had been innoculated by Dr. Leo Dolman. Innoculated with dirty ditch water that had been substituted for the vaccine Dolman had been stealing. Hart's jaw tightened until ridges stood out along each side, and his hands clenched into rock-hard fists. Davey's white, sweating face stood clear before him, and he heard the memory of the boy's tortured voice crying out: *"Don't let me die, Hart! I'm afraid!"* No hopelessness of purpose, not even the self-exile that he lived, could stand against the strength of that bitter memory. Hart's brooding eyes opened at last, the consuming hate and determination in them undiminished.

The mountain wind came down the length of the street and pushed against him, chilling him. He shivered and pulled his ragged coat tighter. He thrust his hands into his pockets and became aware again of the money he had won at the Fair Chance. A smile eased the grimness of his mouth, and he turned and walked down the street. He entered Kader's Dry Goods Emporium and came out a half hour later with two large packages. He studied the street for a moment, then crossed between two moving ore wagons to the far side. He went into a lamp-lit barbershop. The single chair was occupied by a long-haired cowhand, and the dark-skinned barber was busy. Two other riders, already shorn, waited for the one in the chair, and Hart laid his packages down, took an empty straightback chair. He tipped it back against the wall and let his eyes close. Tiredness sagged the firmness of his face, hollowed his eyes, but he

did not sleep, and as a step sounded outside the shop, his eyes came warily open, but the walker went past after glancing in.

A hand-lettered sign on the wall above the single dust-bleared mirror read:

HAIR-CUTTING	25c
SHAVING	15c
SOAP	5c
BATHS	$1.00

"Next!" the barber said, loudly. Hart opened his eyes to see the three riders file out. He got up and climbed into the wooden barber-chair.

"I want to find out if I'm a man or a shaggy dog," Hart said. "I'll need a bath."

The barber's dark face widened in a grin. "You ain't jokin', brother," he said. He spoke without offense and moved toward the door. "I'll get Jake to fill the tub. Cost you a buck."

Hart nodded. "I've got it," he said, and rattled the coins in his pocket. The barber grinned and went out. Hart rested his head against the leather-covered holder and closed his eyes again. The barber was back in a moment with a Negro who pushed past the rug hung as a curtain across the back end of the shop. Water splashed loudly.

Without being aware of it, Hart drifted into an uneasy sleep. The barber's sharp: "Next!" awakened him. His face felt cool and clean, the back of his neck naked. He grinned and dug out a silver dollar, then matched it with two more. In the dusty mirror he studied himself. The barber had taken his time; there was a single part down the center of Hart's head, and the hair was carefully swept in a curve to either side over his forehead. He thought it made him look like a Delmonico's bartender.

"Bath's waitin'," the barber said. "Want Jake to scrub your hide?"

Hart shook his head. "I want to take my time."

The barber winked. "You're payin' for it."

Hart walked past the rug curtain. He carried his packages and his bedroll with him. He tossed the bedroll to one side, undressed and threw his dirt-stiff clothing atop it, even his worn shoes. The Negro dumped a last bucket of hot water into the high-backed wooden tub.

"Jake, there's a dollar for you if you take this junk outside and burn it."

"Yessuh!" The Negro exposed white teeth in a wide grin. He went out with Hart's old clothes and bedroll. Only the money in his pockets and the bowie knife he had placed atop it remained of what he had brought in with him. He climbed into the tub and sank into the water gingerly, feeling the bite of the heat. The hot water covered him and he relaxed. Despite himself his eyes closed. He heard the Negro come in, shuffle past the curtain. He heard the barber's monotonous tones as he talked to another customer. Then Hart tensed, and his eyes opened. A man had come into the shop, almost silently, and the barber had not spoken to him. Feet stepped lightly toward the rear of the shop.

The rug curtain swung away and a heavy-set man came in. It was Miles Gimpler and he was smiling. He wore a broadcloth many-buttoned coat that emphasized by its straight lines the roundness of his belly. He studied Hart silently for a moment then shook his head.

"A man without a gun is truly naked, friend," he said.

Hart smiled back. His right hand came over the edge of the tub, holding the glistening length of the bowie knife. Water dripped from its honed edge to the floor, making a dark spot on the dry wood.

Gimpler's merry eyes widened. "Texas toothpick," he said. "Bowie's little equalizer. It won't replace a gun, friend."

Hart continued to smile, but his blue eyes were cold. "I know that, Miles," he answered. "A gambling man knows the odds against him. A fast gunman can empty a Colt's repeater in less than a second. But there is more than ninety

percent of a man's body where a bullet wound is not instantly fatal. For instance, I've seen a man with five holes in his stomach live ten minutes. And once your gun's empty—what have you got?" His hand moved, and the blade of the knife seemed to shine with a wicked light of its own.

Despite himself, Gimpler stared at the glistening blade and shivered. His eyes probed at Hart's face, read nothing but hardness in the thin features. "You've a hard way, friend Caven," he said, slowly. "Damned hard. I pity the man who elects to try you out. Funny, but a gun doesn't seem as big as it did a minute ago."

Hart laid the knife on the pile of coins beside the tub. He groped for and found the bar of yellow soap. He lathered his upper body, rinsed off, began on his stomach and legs. Flat layers of rubbery muscle rippled across his chest. Gimpler watched him in silence until he had finished and stood up to towel himself off.

"It happened about the way I expected it to," Gimpler said, finally. "A bunch of miners kicked the windows out of the Fair Chance." His crooked grin slid into place. "They were carrying a rope—and the stage for Thunder Rock won't leave until midnight. That's two hours away. I saw you come in here, and decided I'd like company—off the street."

He plucked a thick cheroot from his breast pocket, bit off the end and lighted it. The acrid smoke coiled out before his face. "They caught Al Midlan and beat the living hell out of him. Rode him out of town. Al's a funny guy. He blames you, not himself."

"He had his chance to settle with me," Hart said. He dressed slowly. The clean linens felt harsh to his skin, but fitted well. He pulled on his new trousers and buttoned them.

"I know that," Gimpler said. "But Midlan doesn't like a man looking him in the eye. He'll wait a long time if he has to. But he'll turn up. Two-shot derringer, calibre .50 up his sleeve. Spring-rigged so all he has to do is flex his wrist." The thickset man's grin widened. "But a derringer slug

won't carry. He'll have to come close to you. That I'd like to see."

Hart said, flatly: "You've got queer tastes in amusement. I knew a man once who enjoyed watching pig sticking, even though he couldn't use the knife himself." Hart adjusted the black string tie about his throat, shrugged into the coat. It was dark in color and was a good fit. He buttoned it while Gimpler eyed him with amusement.

"A spade is a spade with you, isn't it, Caven? I like that. Most men won't say what they think when it might rile another man. But that doesn't bother you. You don't give a damn for anybody—I suspect that includes yourself." His dark eyes were oblique, veiling his real thoughts. "However, I wasn't thinking about the long range possibility of you two tangling. It's closer than you think. Midlan has some friends, bought and paid for. I saw two of them just now. They've got you pinned here, friend Caven. You step out that front door—you're whipsawed. You'll be a permanent resident of Denver."

Hart frowned as he pocketed his money and thrust the bowie knife into his belt. "What's your stake, Gimpler? You made a bet you want to copper?"

The heavy man shook his head. "Now that isn't a nice thing to say when I'm doing you a favor."

"All right, it isn't. I'm not nice, either." Hart's smile thinned to grim lines. "I don't like favors when I don't understand what is behind them, and I don't like a joker in a deck. I like to know when the cards are rigged. Lay them out for me to see."

Gimpler was still amused. He blew out smoke and nodded. "You're good," he said. "Better than any crimper I ever saw dummy a pack of cards. Crimping's the last trick in the deck, so it figures you know all the rest even better. So you've got scruples—if you change your mind, you'll be rich in a year. I'd like to be rich, too. Plain and simple, friend. I need you; I want it so you need me. We'd make quite a pair."

"No doubt." Hart said, wryly. He turned to look at the rear entrance to the long, narrow building.

Gimpler's lungs sounded. "It's covered. You're boxed in—unless I unbox you. That's it, short and sweet and to the point."

"Maybe you're bluffing." Hart returned, evenly. "It could figure out that way. I told you no. You won't take it for an answer. Maybe Midlan has no friends. Maybe I'm not boxed—just foxed."

The heavy man studied the tip of his cigar. "You are a suspicious man, but some hands are expensive to call. When you bet your life, better figure the odds pretty closely. You only lose that bet once." He shrugged. "It's up to you to call your turn."

Hart sat down on the edge of a stool and crossed his legs. "I'm in no hurry," he answered, slowly. "Tell me what you will do about it if it lays the way you think it does."

Miles Gimpler laughed again. "Money buys a lot of things. In this Territory a man's life is worth fifty dollars—if you know the men to hire. Midlan knows them all."

Hart met his glance evenly. "Is it worth more than that to you to undo it?"

"If you say it is," Gimpler returned, and waited for his reply, but Hart held it back. That Miles Gimpler knew exactly what he was doing, Hart did not doubt; nor did he really doubt the presence of the hired killers on the street outside. The heavy-set man was not bluffing.

"You play a hard game, Gimpler," Hart said, finally. "But I know the rules." His right hand came up, and the bright edge of the razor-edged knife stood erect. He stepped close to the other man as a part of the same swift movement. "I like a rough game," Hart went on, slowly. "The rougher the better. Like eleven inches of cold steel through your spine if you don't stand up and walk out ahead of me."

Their eyes met and locked, and then to Hart's surprise, Gimpler laughed with real enjoyment in his voice. "You look more like steel every time I see you. It doesn't change

my mind about you, friend Caven. We could own this Territory together. Give it some more thought."

"Later." Hart replied, coldly. "Let's play this hand out first. I'm waiting for you to make up your mind. But I won't wait long."

Miles Gimpler sighed, stirred and came to his feet. "Stubbornness is a virtue under certain conditions. Honesty is another. But blended together they compound a fool. We'll play it your way."

He bunched his shoulders and stepped ahead of Hart past the rug curtain. There was a man in the barber chair, and the dark-skinned barber was busy scraping with a straight razor. Gimpler walked straight to the door, held there. His round, moon-like face swung about and he winked at Hart.

"Now for the fun. Two of them, right and left. I'll take the right. Move when I move, and don't waste time." The amused mockery in his voice matched that in his dark eyes.

Gimpler swung the door open, went through it with a suddenness startling in so large a man, and jumped to the right, his booted feet pounding hard.

Hart was through the door in a single leap. Even as he moved he heard a yell from the street, caught sudden, violent movement in the darkness. Then a gun slammed behind Hart Caven.

Miles Gimpler had not been bluffing, nor were the men in front of Hart. Two guns spoke as one, and they were fired with intent to kill.

CHAPTER FOUR

A MAN'S reaction to stress of danger and excitement is directly traceable to that man's experience and way of life. And Hart Caven's life in the past few years had been anything but tranquil. He had learned the hard lesson of not panicking under fire, of taking the bad with the good and reacting to both with sudden violence when necessary. So

it was now, even as the shots rapped out at him, he was moving, crouched low, running forward and to his left.

Behind him, Hart heard a man's cursing voice, then the lights in the window of the barbershop went out with a crash as the lamps were hurriedly swept to the floor. He did not pause to listen but ran forward toward the street. Off to his right, in the direction that Miles Gimpler had taken, he heard a loud curse, then scuffling noises. There were no more shots from that direction.

The gunman across the street was behind a watering trough, kneeling low. He fired once again, the bullet smashing a window in the building behind Hart. Up the street from the north rumbled an ore wagon, deep-bodied and moving forward under the protesting weight of a full load. Hart heard the driver shout a curse, then saw the man leap from the seat to avoid being caught in a crossfire. The wagon moved forward without pause, the oxen drawing it plodding stolidly ahead.

Hart ran for the wagon. He vaulted from the spinning hub up onto the box, sprawled flat across the yielding rocks and dirt. The gun racketed and lead chewed into the side of the wagon. Hart came up to all fours, steel glinting dully in his right fist. He crossed the load of ore at a scrambling run and hurled himself bodily from the far side as the wagon breasted the watering trough behind which crouched the gunman. He saw the man's round, white face staring up at him, saw the lurid red flash of the man's gun, and something tore savagely at Hart's coat. Then he was atop the man, his weight and momentum spinning them both hard against the foot-high boardwalk.

It was strength against strength and hard, smashing blows. The man's gun thundered again, and fiery hot iron seemed to scrape across Hart's chest, then he swayed in, and the knife swung down and up, with all the driving force of his body behind it. It was a vicious, killing stroke, and he struck home. The man in front of him screamed and then crumpled to the ground. Panting, Hart came erect, eyes blazing.

The ore wagon rattled on down the street. In the wake of the shots, silence held for a moment, then men talked all at once, and feet pounded along the boardwalk. A man came running across the street, and Hart swung about, knife ready.

"Hold it, damn it! It's only me!" panted Miles Gimpler, coming up. His great chest was heaving with his efforts, but he was grinning. He stared down at the inert figure asprawl close to the boardwalk and lost his grin. "My God, I never seen a man move so fast. You went after him like a hunting cougar." He shuddered, then abruptly shrugged and grinned again. "There's fifty bucks he won't be spending. You made it short and sweet, friend Caven—but I haven't the figure for this kind of work."

"What happened to the other one?" Hart asked, still breathing hard.

Gimpler shook his head. "Got away," he replied. "I didn't try to keep him. But the time has come to scatter and run. This might be hard to explain—and in any case it will make a marked man of you. I, for one, have no intention of sweating it out in Denver's sod-walled pokey until they decide it was self-defense. The Thunder Rock stage leaves in thirty minutes—and I've got two tickets."

"You had it figured this way from the start, didn't you, Gimpler?" Hart asked, quietly. The heavy man's grin was his answer, and Hart took but a moment to consider it. The pattern was obscure as most are in life, but it seemed intent on linking him with the short, thick man who awaited his reply. He took his moment while Gimpler waited, and then slowly he nodded.

Gimpler said: "We'll settle the rest later. Now clean that ugly sticker of yours and put it away. You look like the wrath of God. Brush off your clothes. Then we'll have a quiet little drink before we blow the dust of Denver off our boots."

Hart did as he was told, then gingerly felt the bullet-scrape across his chest. The shot had ripped a three-inch

line across the fabric of his skirt, searing the skin but not breaking it. The burn stung to the touch; that was all. But there was a triangular tear in the skirt of his coat where the slug had torn through. Two reminders of the closeness of death in a quarrel he had not chosen. He shook his head.

They crossed the street to the boardwalk. There was scurrying and talking behind them. As they came abreast a large double window from which streamed a flood of bright lamplight, a tall, yellow-haired man ran past them. Even in that brief glance he was an arresting figure, and Hart stared after him.

"John Lesley Cabe, Marshal of Denver," Gimpler said, and winked at Hart. Then he nodded his head and they turned into the Denver House.

The saloon was noisy and mobbed by a good-natured crowd of freighters, miners and riders from outlying ranches, a bearded, jocular crew who paid no attention at all to the two hard-breathing men who made their way to the long bar. Gimpler cleared a space by the simple expedient of jamming his hard elbows into the ribs of the men to either side of him, and motioned Hart to step up beside him. The thick man held up two fingers, and presently two shot glasses appeared before them and a long-necked clear-glass bottle. Gimpler poured the red whisky into the glasses, picked up his own, waited for Hart to do likewise, then said:

"Here's to luck—the kind you make yourself!'

They drank, and Gimpler promptly refilled the glasses. He produced two black cheroots from his breast pocket, handed one to Hart, lighted them both from a sulphur match. "I like you, Caven," Gimpler said as their eyes met over the match-flame. "But damned if I can understand you."

"You can't judge a man's hand until you see his hole card," Hart answered.

Gimpler blew out the match, watched the wisp of smoke that curled up from the blackened end. "And you're keeping yours covered, is that it?" He shrugged. "It's not hard to figure. You're looking for a man—maybe more than one.

You'll fall into them—when you need. Nothing like it is important to you until that it does. That satisfies it, friend Caven. But there's one thing you're forgetting." He frowned down at the glowing tip of his cheroot. "Everything ends sometime. A man can't live for just one thing, see even love—because when it ends, like it always must, sometime—he's got nothing left."

Hart met Gimpler's gaze levelly. "You cross bridges when you reach them."

"If you find them still standing" Gimpler returned, then shrugged again. "Like I said, I don't understand your way of figuring it. But it's your deal, friend Caven,—and the stage will be loading by now. It's eleven hours to Thunder Rock, and the seats are hard." He turned away, and then paused. His oddly mocking grin appeared. "But right now you have company coming."

Hart turned to see a tall, rawboned man come into the saloon. His gray eyes moved over the crowd, found Gimpler, shifted quickly to Hart and held there. His long, acquiline-featured face was bisected by drooping yellow mustaches that fell almost to the point of his squarish chin. There was an electric impact to his personality, and Hart knew him at once as the man he had glimpsed in the pool of light on the street. On his tattersall vest a silver star shone brightly.

"Hello, John," Gimpler said, quickly. "Friend of mine name of Hart Caven. He's just passing through Denver."

Marshal John Cabe's diamond-bright eyes picked at Hart's face dispassionately. His hawklike features were regular enough to be strikingly handsome, but the impression was dispelled by the ruthless lines of his wide mouth. "Dilby Creighton's dead," he announced, flatly. "Got a hole in him you could stick your arm in."

Mile Gimpler's hand made a steadying pressure on Hart's arm. "Is that so?" he asked, mildly. "People get plain careless where they dump their garbage." His smile was benignly bland. "I'm out of business in Denver, John. Moving on to Thunder Rock. Caven here is moving with me."

The watchful eyes of the marshal kept to Hart's face, then slowly he smiled as if he had decided something. "All right. The stage leaves in fifteen minutes—don't miss it. Mister Caven, we get three-four killings a night here in Denver. Reckon Dilby Creighton ain't much—but I suggest you ride around Denver next time. I don't like cleaning up another man's mess."

Gimpler's hand held Hart tightly. The heavy man said quickly: "Don't blame you a mite, Marshal. Not a mite. We still have time to buy you a drink."

"Catching that stage is more inportant, Miles," Cabe returned, flatly. "Be on it—both of you." He turned around, moved away through the crowd, his tall, lean figure setting him apart.

"The golden-haired Marshal of Denver, by way of Dodge City, Abilene, Apache Wells, Medicine Bend—and every other hell-hole in the West," Gimpler intoned, harshly. "Time we were leaving, friend Caven. We mustn't disappoint the Marshal."

They moved together through the crowded room to the street. Gimpler paused there to blow out a cloud of smoke. "You see Cabe's repeater? Ever see a gun like it before? Take a good look next time—and pray God you don't ever have to stand up to it. He had it made in London by Le Mat and Girard—seven shots, calibre .40—and the center pin of the cylinder is a four inch barrel holding a 20-gauge shotgun shell. 'Insurance' is what John Cabe calls it—I say it's cold-blooded murder."

In front of the Miner's Rest stood the stagecoach, the eight-horse team standing in harness, running lights gleaming. The lacings of the luggage boot were open and the driver, a stout-bellied man was heaving a heavy bag into place while a small figure danced excitedly about him.

The driver's deep-throated voice came clearly: "I'm a patient man, Doc—but if you don't shut up your belly-grumbin', I'm tossin' your junk to hell out an' leavin' you here with it."

The little man's voice cut in plaintively: "Damn your eyes, Bill Walden—you can't talk to me like that!"

"Doc Kline, the sodbuster peddler," Gimpler said. "One more maverick not wanted in Denver. We've got company, friend Caven."

There were two men already in the stage, sitting opposite each other. A big, bluff man was groaning at the argument going on in the street, the other man sat broodingly silent. With a start, Hart recognized Al Midlan, the gambler from the Fair Chance. The man swiveled his head to take one venomous look, then turned to stare out the window beside him.

"Leastwise you've got a friend aboard," Gimpler grinned. He swung up onto the single step. He moved his bulk inside with surprising grace and sat into a seat next to the big-bodied man at the window. Hart followed suit, and a moment later the tiny man whom the driver had called "Doc" clambered in. His face was small and sharp of feature, his eyes singularly large and tragic of expression, as if Doc Kline had looked too long at the world and found it not to his liking. There was an air of haggard gentility about him as he sat gingerly on the seat next to Al Midlan and mopped his face with a kerchief. Doc Kline, Hart decided, had seen better days, and they had left their indelible mark upon him.

The driver's good-natured face came into view at the open door. "You men settled in? I'll give 'em hell until we reach Junction."

There was a rising tumult in the street outside, with an oddity about it that caught Hart's attention. There was coarse sound of men's laughter, and something like the angry buzzing of bees, high-pitched and irritating. Then John Cabe's deep-toned voice called out: "Hold it, Bill. You've got one more. We're making a clean-sweep this haul—the ladies of Denver have another passenger for you."

The buzzing sound became clear, separating into the strident noises of aroused, jabbering women. Hart, looking from the stage window, saw a single group moving stiffly

along the boardwalk, composed of at least a dozen women, their bulky clothes baring about their ankles, giving them a queer appearance. Like a lot of fat, black beetles walking upright, Hart thought. And in the vanguard a slender, brightly-garbed shape that flounced along as if completely unaware of the violence of her going. Red and blue spangles shone in the yellow light from store and saloon windows, and he caught a glimpse of red-gold hair piled high atop a white, set face.

The tall, impressive figure of the marshal moved to the boardwalk to meet them. He gestured mildly with one hand, a half-placating motion. "I'm sorry, Lou," he said, "but these ladies of the Law and Order Society have decided Denver can do without you. I'll give you a hand up."

The girl with the painted smile and the red-gold hair tossed her head. "Thanks for nothing!" she flashed, and stepped lightly into the stagecoach. She settled into the seat beside Doc Kline, her quick, light-hued eyes taking in the men who were to ride with her, and then she turned to the window and bent forward to make her adieu to the Ladies of the Law and Order Society, an age-old gesture of spread-fingered hand to her face, her thumb to her nose.

"At'a girl, Lou!" Miles Gimpler said. "Give 'em hell."

She flashed him a look that included Hart, then Marshal John Cabe came to the open door. "I said I was sorry, Lou," he said.

"Oh, sure," the girl replied. "But I'm leaving just the same, I notice."

John Cabe shook his head. "I can't help that, Lou." His crooked smile bent the harshness of his mouth. "At least you're in good company, Lou. A crooked gambler, a quack pill peddler, a boss rustler—and a gentleman too handy with a knife."

Hart Caven bent forward, his smile hard and cold. "All we lack is a professional killer," he said. "You coming, Marshal?"

Cabe came closer, his sharp grey eyes meeting Hart's. His

long mustaches gave his lean face a mild air that was not reflected in the cold steel of his eyes. "Maybe we can discuss that sometime," he said, almost pleasantly.

"Be sure you want to," Hart returned, the softness gone from his voice, his face as hard and merciless as the Marshal's.

Invisible lines of tension linked the two men, and neither would give that fraction of an inch that meant an easing of it. Then Bill Wadden came up behind the marshal. "Time to roll out of here," he announced in his bellowing tones, and John Cabe stepped back to let the driver slam the door shut. Wadden moved up front and the stagecoach swayed to his weight as he mounted to the seat.

John Cabe moved back. Behind him the indignant ladies of the Law and Order Society were yellow-light bathed black harpies, poised for flight, their dresses stirring in the wind. Lamplight limned them and spilled across the hawklike features of John Lesley Cabe.

"Now you've done it," Miles Gimpler said, softly. His dark eyes probed at Hart's face without real expression behind them. "You're as good as dead, friend Caven. John Cabe will see to that."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE STAGE lurched, then jolted forward. The girl in the spangled dress moved restlessly, settling into the seat opposite Hart, and in the flashing of light that came through the open windows as the stage moved down the street he saw her eyes studying him. They were eyes, Hart decided, that had seen many men, and liked what they saw more than once. There was an honesty about them that was unexpected and somehow disconcerting. At the moment they

were undecided about him, and it moved Hart to smile. The answering smile was quick but not artificial.

"I like a man with sand," the girl said. If he had expected coarseness in her voice, he was disappointed. Her tones were light and mellow, with a studied incuriousness that was somehow challenging.

Before Hart could reply, the little sparrow-like man piped up, still mopping his gaunt face with a handkerchief. "I can't understand this rudeness. I've done no man in Denver a disservice."

"Maybe they didn't like the creek water you was sellin', Doc," the bluff man beside the window returned, grinning broadly. He let his eyes roam over the occupants of the stage and then shook his head. "If it wasn't for the lady, I'd be thinkin' I was keepin' poor company from the way John Cabe put it."

"Thank you for the kind words, Toby," the girl said, quickly. She looked once more at Hart, and Miles Gimpler caught the gesture.

"Might as well get acquainted," he chuckled. "This is Hart Caven who just had words with our fine figure of a town marshal. Hart, Toby Bell—you'll have heard of him." The big, buff man grinned, a momentary flash of yellow light spilling across his broad face.

"Howdy," he said.

"Next to Toby is Doctor Erasmus Kline, vendor of patent medicines."

"Which is *not* creek water, but the distilled product of the world's greatest scientists, compounded accurately and scientifically—"

"Later, Doc," Miles cut in mildly. "The lady is Lou Winters who can deal a turn with the best of them—and do it on the level," Gimpler finished with an admiring smile.

"If that's a compliment, then thanks," the girl said in her studied, careful voice. "Mr. Caven, I'm glad to know any man who has the guts to speak up to John Cabe. You'll make your mark—or you won't live long."

Hart nodded. "Thank you," he said and lapsed into silence.

"As for Al, there," Miles said, and chuckled again, "I think you've met."

Midland swivelled his head. For an instant he glared at Hart, then he turned back to the window.

"It's a long ride to Junction," Miles Gimpler said. "Relax. This pile of rusty bolts offers few comforts, but of what there are—help yourselves."

Hart put his back against the hardness of the seat, rested his left arm on the window sill. He laid his head back and let the rocking motion of the coach sway it. He closed his eyes, then abruptly opened them again. The odd sense that tells some men that another is staring fixedly at him worked strongly in Hart Caven. He felt it now; it was the girl. She was leaning forward, her chin on her hands, looking at him. In the shadowy gloom of the coach their eyes met. Then she smiled.

"Goodnight, Mr. Caven," she said, then turned to look steadily out the window.

The last lights of Denver moved behind them. They crossed a series of rutted crossroads, then the team settled to an even pace, and the steadying cries of the driver blended into the rattling noises of the stagecoach and the regular clop-clopping of the team.

In the darkness a man coughed hackingly. Hart heard the little man called Doc Kline stirring, then the deep liquid gurgle of a bottle.

"Drinkin' your own rotgut, Doc?" asked Toby Bell's interested voice. "Maybe I'll be sociable an' try a snort."

"You will *not!*" Doc Kline retorted indignantly, and silence fell upon the coach.

The swaying and jouncing and the noises of the team took on a sort of rhythmic pattern. One of the men in the coach began to snore, a soft, muffled sound. Atop the stage the driver began a song, thinned by the wind, and oddly melodious.

There's a yellow rose in Texas,
That I am going to see,
No other darkey knows her,
No darkey only me—

Hart had heard that song before, sung by men in gray uniforms who rode through the chill ground mists at dawn to hurl themselves gallantly at Custer's charging might. It brought back clear, clean memories of those days before Yellow Tavern—before Andersonville. Memories of Davey's smiling, carefree face, of his laughing daring, the fine way he sat his McClellan saddle, his blue kepi tipped rakishly forward. . . .

She cried so when I left her
It like to broke my heart.
And if I ever find her,
We never more will part.

Hart was aware of Gimpler's weight against him; the big man was sleeping, quietly, without tension, like a child. The girl's voice came quietly to him: "We all have memories, Mr. Caven," she said. "Some hurt more than others—but it doesn't make them any more important."

Hart replied, softly: "I thought so, once—a long time ago."

"You will think so again." He measured the interest of her voice, let it hold him for a moment, then shook his head.

"I'm afraid not," he said, finally. There was a finality in his voice that made her continue to look at him.

"Sometimes it helps to have someone listen to you. Can you talk about it?"

"I can," he said flatly, and left it like that.

She waited a moment, then laughed, without harshness. "You can, but you won't. Despite your hardness, you are honest. I could like you, Mr. Caven." It was not said lightly, and it was not meant lightly, and the fact registered with Caven.

"I suppose I should thank you for saying that," he answered, slowly. "But I won't. It seems I have a knack of hurting things I touch."

Her reply came softly: "I have gambled since I was twelve; my father rode a river boat from New Orleans. I cut my teeth on a faro case. No matter what you thought, it wasn't man-trouble that made them drive me out of Denver."

She was waiting for his reply, and it would mean something to her, and for that reason Hart remained silent for a moment. Then he said: "And if I said I believed that—what then?"

Her smile came quickly. "Then I would say that I am used to taking chances, Mr. Caven. I would take this one."

He looked away, out of the window to the silvery plains across which the stage rolled endlessly. "Thank you," he replied, at length. "I admire you for it."

"But the answer is no," she finished for him. She was leaning forward the better to see his face. "Then we will leave it like this, but not all goodbyes are final, Mr. Caven. We will see."

He felt her withdraw from him. When he looked again at her, she was curled tightly on the wide seat, her head pillowed in her arms against the window edge, her eyes closed. In the soft light that came through the glassless window her face had lost the painted harshness, was younger, with less purpose in it, and somehow more appealing to him. Deliberately he studied those features for long moments, letting his feelings build inside him; the loneliness, the longing for a woman, the many, many things so long denied. It was a hurt inside him, a weakness he could not deny, but only submerge with a harsh wave of bitterness. And in this quiet moment, the sustaining force of it seemed weaker, less able to hold him to his iron-hard purpose. He turned back to the window.

The moon-shadow of the stagecoach rolled beside it, stretching out across the gray flatness. Hart let the harsh blacks and grays of night fill his mind. When the sharpness

of the tumult inside him had worn thin, he leaned back again and closed his eyes. Sleep came slowly, bringing with it the tormenting dreams he had known so long, of Davey's white, pain-distorted face, his boyish, pleading voice . . .

The brakes squealed, a high-pitched, agonized sound. Yellow lights flashed in the window. Hart saw the sleep-puffed features of the men about him. Only Al Midlan kept his face turned away, intent on his own bitterness. The stage slowed to a stop, then jounced as Bill Wadden climbed down from his perch atop it.

"Junction!" he called out in his deep voice. "There's chow waitin'."

Hart opened the stagecoach door, then stepped down. He waited and lifted a hand to help the woman out. She hesitated, then took his hand after looking full into his face. She stepped to the ground, brushing at her rustling skirts.

Doc Kline climbed down, groaning, putting his tiny hands to the small of his back. "A man needs an iron bottom to ride this stage," he said, bitterly.

Toby Bell clambered out, grinning. "Must be I got one," the big outlaw said. He inhaled deeply. "I smell snow." He said it like it meant a pleasure to him.

Al Midlan was the last to come out. Hart was close to the bottom step. Midlan almost touched him as he climbed down. Hart said: "Midlan." The gambler stopped as he reached the ground, swung around. His long face was marred by twin lines beside his mouth. There was a bruise on one cheek that had darkened.

"What is between us has to go no further," Hart said.

The gambler let his dark eyes meet Hart's for an instant. His mouth drew down, and he turned aside and walked on. Doc Kline coughed embarressedly and Toby Bell took his arm. As they moved away, Miles Gimpler laughed.

"The damned fool thinks you are hedging," he said. "You might as well cut your notch now."

Hart frowned after the narrow-shouldered figure of the gambler. "The worst of it is, he thinks he is right. He thinks I trimmed him to show him up. He wants to get back at me. He's made his try, but that isn't enough. He'll push it." There was regret in Hart's voice, and the stocky saloon-keeper studied him through narrowed eyes.

"You're a hell of a hard man to figure out," he said, finally. "Come on, let's get that grub. My big gut's chasing my little one with cannibalism in mind."

The Junction Station was a grubby sod-walled affair with a leanto across the back of it that served as kitchen and quarters for the Mexican family that ran it. A bar crossed the far side with a wide *zerape* hung across the mud wall behind it. The bright colors of the wool had run from a leak in the sod roof, streaking the plastered mud wall below it. The passengers from the stage were clustered in the middle of a hand-hewn table that ranged the room opposite the bar.

Hart slid onto the bench and glanced about quickly. Al Midlan was not in the room. Miles Gimpler sat down beside the woman, Lou Winters, and her eyes moved to Hart's face, held there with speculation and something more in them. For a moment her glance held, then she applied herself to her food and did not look up again. Hart ate his meal of beans and steak in silence, washed it down with the muddy coffee, then stood up and went outside.

The light streaks of dawn were turning pink, spreading out across the belly of the sky. Hart put his back to the sod wall and lighted a cheroot. The acrid smoke tasted good, and he found it possible to relax completely.

"Can I join you?" a soft voice asked, and he turned slowly to see the girl who had come through the door to stand beside him.

Hart said: "It's a free country."

Her face was oddly pale beneath her makeup. "You don't like women like me, do you?"

He considered the words for a moment while he studied

the glowing tip of the cheroot. "It's been a long time since I've been around a woman," he said, tiredly. "Does my telling matter a damn? I don't think so. You know what you're doing, you know what you want to do, and it's your life."

"My life," she repeated, and looked away from him toward the flat eastern horizon, the new light harsh on her tired features. "You're right, such as it is." She closed her eyes, and the lines about her jaw became firmer, more set. "Being thrown out of Denver did something for me." She looked quickly at him, her eyes level and frank. "No, I'm being sorry for myself. I just want to talk. It's something you might try sometime."

"Maybe I will—sometime," he returned.

"Believe me, it helps." She looked back to the horizon. "Denver isn't the first town I've left by request. Dodge City, Abilene, Apache Wells—I've hit most of them. They all die—or become respectable if you like—and it is time for the Lou Winters to move on."

"Times change, people don't."

"I suppose not." She was close beside him. He could smell the soft fragrance of her perfume. Almost he could feel the warmth of her against him. It awakened old desires that stirred to strong new life.

"I used to wonder what was in it for a woman like me," she went on, slowly. Her voice held a strong edge. "Now I know. I know what I want. Something—anything—that will put me beyond the reach of women like those back in Denver. Something that will make them crawl small every time they see me, make them hate my guts—and make it impossible for them to hurt me again."

In the light of dawn the harsh lines of his face seemed deeper. "There is always a time when you don't want to be hurt." His voice was bitter. "It wears away."

She shook her head. "Perhaps it does, for a man. Not for a woman. Thunder Rock will be a new beginning for us all. I'll get what I want there. It is a feeling I've never had

before, maybe a part of the same feeling that makes me want to tell my troubles to you."

She was looking closely at him. "You called out a name while you slept. Who is Davey?"

The woman felt the tension that instantly wracked him, and the flash of his colorless eyes shocked her. Then he shook his head. "Davey was my brother. He's dead." For a moment he held still, then his hand moved, flung away the half-smoked cheroot. The flat tones were back in his voice as he said: "I wish you luck in Thunder Rock."

He walked away from her, into the half-darkness some distance before turning to look back. In the yellow lamp-light that came through the open door, he saw the woman's slim figure move inside. Aching loneliness welled unbidden inside Hart, but he forced it away. Then Bill Wadden's voice called out: "Time to roll! Thunnder Rock next stop!"

Dark figures filed through the doorway. In the window lights the coach stood squatly. A fresh team had been harnessed while they ate, and they stamped impatiently. Doc Kline scrambled aboard, followed by Toby Bell. Hart heard the squeaking of the springs. Then Miles Gimpler came out, got into the stage. Wadden's voice yelled: "Let's go!"

Hart held there, caution easing into him, strung taut by the wary sense of the man on the trail. Al Midkan had not appeared. He was either in the building—or out here somewhere in the darkness, waiting . . .

Caven walked away from the coach, keeping to the far side, beyond reach of the yellow lights of the station. He moved softly, making little sound. His right hand unbuttoned his coat, let it hang free. The hilt of his knife came readily to his grasp, but he did not draw it yet. He paced slowly, moved abreast of the stage. He could see the rectangle of the body against the station lights. The team moved restlessly and Bill Wadden called out again.

"Come on, you two fellers! Let's roll out of here!"

Hart halted, stood there quietly. It was an old story to

him, stalking a man in the darkness. There was no thrill left in it. It was harsh, brutal business, and there could be only one mistake made. Hart would not make it.

Then suddenly, behind him, Al Midlan spoke flatly: "I've got something for you, Caven."

Hart started to spin around, and at the same instant the red flames of a gun lanced out at him, and he heard the savage roar of a derringer.

Caven lunged to his left as the gun blasted a second time. His right hand came up to his shoulder and the knife-blade glistened with reflected light. For an instant he poised there, then he came forward, his hand whipping down and the knife spinning viciously toward the gunman with all the violence of Hart's moving body and muscular right arm.

James Bowie had been a man of violence, and the knife that bore his name had been designed for just one purpose: to destroy an enemy quickly and silently. The heavy blade, capable of blocking the full swing of a saber, with a length that made it awkward in inexperienced hands, had a truly remarkable balance. As a throwing weapon, it had no peer; and the razor-honed point and edge coupled with its weight made penetration a certainty. In the hands of an expert it was the most deadly and vicious weapon known on the frontier—and Hart Caven was no novice. An eternity of practise faced the man who chose a knife as his weapon, and long hours of steady throwing were behind Hart Caven's arm. At any distance up to thirty feet a man could be incredibly accurate with a Bowie knife—and Al Midlan, knowing the limitations of his double-barrelled derringer had made the mistake of waiting within half that distance.

Hart heard the solid *thwunk* of the knife as it struck, then the gambler's high-pitched grunt of pain. This was followed an instant later by a curse, and something metallic clattered on the ground as it struck loose rock. A vague disappointment filled Hart; his aim in the uncertain half-light had been high. The knife had taken Midlan in the upper part of his left shoulder, and the gambler had with-

drawn it, thrown it to the ground. An instant later his feet pounded away. He had made his try, and it hadn't come off. But Hart felt a cold certainty there would be a second time . . .

The cold mountain wind whipped around his gaunt, square-shouldered figure. Voices called out from the stagecoach. The running footsteps faded out, and Hart moved forward. He found his knife where Midlan had thrown it. The blade was slippery to his touch and he thrust it again and again into the soft sand to clean it. He used his handkerchief to clean the hilt, thrust the knife back in his belt and turned around. The stained handkerchief fluttered in the breeze, whipped suddenly away. Hart walked back to the stage.

Bill Wadden had clambered down from his seat. His round face stared at Hart uncertainly. "What the hell happened?" he asked.

"It's all right," Hart answered. He moved to the open door of the couch, put his foot on the single iron step.

"Yeah, but what about that other feller?" Wadden demanded.

"He isn't coming," Hart replied. He climbed into the coach.

Wadden hesitated an instant, then shrugged. "None o' my business," he said. "Here we go!"

Hart slid into the seat and slammed the door.

"Quick and nasty," Toby Bell said. "The sneakin' yellow coyote."

"Quick but not final," Miles Gimpler added. "You hit him, Hart?"

"Yes, I hit him," Hart answered, and lapsed into silence. The stage lurched, began to roll forward. Hart slumped into the corner of the seat and closed his eyes. He was aware of a slight tremble in his arms, but it went away after awhile, and he slept, this time dreamlessly.

From beneath lowered eyelids, in the growing light of dawn, Lou Winters watched the sleeping man's face. The

features were regular, but too harshly drawn to be handsome. It was a face you would not forget. Nor the seething hate that lay behind the masklike calm. For one terrible unguarded instant she had seen the hell inside him when she had spoken the name "Davey."

Despite the hardness of him, she felt herself drawn to him, coldly and without regret. It made no hurt inside her, but the attraction she had felt had been strengthened by it. It lay firmly within her now as she looked at him, something without beginning, doubtful of growth, and uncertain of ending.

"The man is unique in my experience," Miles Gimpler said, softly. "He has room for nothing but hate in his heart. He eats it and breathes it; it is all of his life—and it's a cinch bet it will eventually be the cause of his death." The heavy-set man was looking directly at her, studying her as if he had never clearly seen her before. "There is enough trouble in life for people like us, Lou, without our looking for more."

She turned her eyes toward Gimpler. His round face was a mask to hide his true self. There was a strength of purpose beneath the dark serenity of his eyes, a set to his jaw that marked him as of the same mold as Hart Caven. But the bitterness in Miles Gimpler was confined to himself, apparent in the self-mockery that rode him so hard. She read this with a new clarity that seemed to come as a part of the determination that filled her.

"Every gamble means a chance at losing, Miles," she replied, softly. "God knows I've taken my share of both. Including other men if you want it said that way."

He considered her and her words, and the deep-seated force within her. He frowned. "The odds are too long. There is nothing but hurt for you, Lou. There are other men. Look around you."

"Men," she said, bitterly. She shook her head. "Don't worry about me, Miles. I've had my look, and I see what it has gotten me. One thing about the Law and Order Ladies

of Denver—they taught me there are other things that matter."

"It's easy to go off the deep end when your feelings get stepped on," Gimpler said. "Make sure these things really count."

"To me they do," she replied, and met his gaze squarely. She looked again at the sleeping Hart and then shook her head slowly. Her smile was almost sad. "No, I won't be foolish this time." Her eyes returned to Gimpler, considered him quietly. "Thunder Rock is one more boom town in the Territory. I've heard it said that this one is the big one. Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't—but one thing is sure. I won't be asked to leave. There will be no more boom towns for me after Thunder Rock. I am sure of that."

He was watching her closely with his small eyes. There was a shrewdness behind them that was disquieting, but fitted the purpose she had in mind. Her smile widened. "But a woman cannot stand alone, Miles," she went on, slowly. "There must be a man. A man to face the crowd, to stand in front."

He kept his face expressionless, but his eyes narrowed. "Not a man like Hart Caven."

She shook her head. "No, not a man like him. I had another man in mind." She looked fully at Miles Gimpler. "We'll both be starting over again in Thunder Rock. We'll both need help. It's as simple as that."

His self-mocking smile bent his lips. "I'm listening."

"There is one thing that must be understood first of all," she said, evenly. Her eyes were direct, meeting his. "I do not go along with the deal. Now or ever."

He said nothing, but his heavy shoulders made a shrugging movement.

"The rest is easily said. We will open a place in Thunder Rock. We will keep it open, day and night. We will start with a tent if we have to, and we will build. As long as Thunder Rock lasts, we will last. And when it ends, we

will go our separate ways. Colorado is due for the big strike. Thunder Rock could be it."

Miles Gimpler pursed his lips, leaned back and closed his eyes. He opened them again after a moment. "There are things that could happen."

She nodded. "I know that. But we will keep it honest, and the word will get around. There will be no ringers, no Al Midkins. The house percentage can make you rich if it lasts long enough. I intend to make it last."

Gimpler frowned. "It sounds good. Maybe I need you, too, Lou. You can make a man see things that attract him. What attracts you?"

"Money," she answered, quickly. "It is the difference."

Miles laughed. "Honesty is a strange thing to find in a woman. You will get your money. It may not buy what you want."

She looked once more at the face of Hart Caven. The harsh flat planes of it disturbed her. The man would go on—to what? Why should it concern her so much? The bitterness that lay upon him so heavily would touch her if she persisted in this feeling. She forced it away and returned to Miles Gimpler.

"I'll take that chance," she said, softly.

His smile was quick. "All right. You've made yourself a deal."

She felt no surge of confidence, no swift triumph at this beginning. Only a strange dissatisfaction that seemed associated somehow with the bitterness that filled Hart Caven. . . .

The gray murk thinned; a raw red dawnlight bathed the stagecoach. The flat plains lifted in undulations that rocked the passengers of the stage. Then the road cut to the north, began the sharp rise to the first shoulders of the high Mosquitoes through which it cut in a series of switchbacks and long, straight rises through sharply-cleft canyon passages.

The stage lurched through a rutted wash, and Hart Caven opened his eyes. Bright sunlight filled the coach, and through the open window his eyes looked upon the endless prairie from this new height. He straightened slowly, easing his muscles. The other passengers were stirring. Miles Gampler yawned mightily and then stretched.

"Good morning, friend Caven," he said. "A new day, and a better one. I feel this." Gimpler looked at the woman across from them.

Her face was pale, Hart thought, with purple smudges under her eyes. She had not slept. The things within her were too strong, too pressing. Hart made his small smile and nodded. The woman smiled back.

Toby Bell kicked one leg sharply out. "Cramp," he said, testily. "Damn Mr. Butterfield's stages, anyway! Beggin' your pardon, Ma'am."

Doc Kline dug into an inner pocket of his black Prince Albert, came out with a flat brown bottle. He turned his head, lifted it briefly, lowered it and coughed. "Mountain air," he said. "My elixir is an aid."

Toby Bell laughed. "Better yet if you didn't cut it with creek water." He reached, took the bottle, killed it with one long, steady pull, and heaved the empty flask from the window.

Doc Kline fluttered his hands protestingly, then shrugged and lapsed into a sullen silence.

Suddenly above the noise of the stagecoach came the sharp crack of a rifle. The coach swayed wildly and the leather-lined brakes squealed crazy protests. Hart caught the girl as she tumbled forward. Doc Kline slid off the seat into the aisle with a startled cry. Toby Bell's quick foot against the seat opposite saved him from a spill.

For a brief moment Hart felt the warm softness of the girl pressed against him, her face close. Her eyes were full upon his, and without willing it, he kissed her. He felt her respond, her body coming close, her lips clinging for an instant, then she pulled back.

"Did you have to do that?" she asked. There was no anger, just sudden, harsh hurt in her voice.

The stage rattled crazily, bouncing over rocks, then slowed to a stop. Bill Wadden's frantic cursing came clearly. The girl had drawn back and was staring at Hart. The memory of the kiss lay between them, a disturbing thing.

Toby Bell demanded angrily of no one: "What the hell goes on?"

And Miles Gimpler's laconic voice replied: "I don't know what it looks like to you, friend, but to me it looks like a holdup."

CHAPTER SIX

Lou Winters leaned forward quickly. "Give me your money."

Hart met her eyes, then dug into his pocket. The woman took it and it vanished inside her spangled dress even as the door of the coach was jerked roughly open and a man's bearded face was thrust in. He was big, wide of shoulder, with a sullen cast to his features and a dullness about his eyes.

"Get out of there!" he ordered, sharply, waving a heavy Colt revolver.

"Coming, coming!" Doc Kline piped, and slipped forward, missed the step and fell to the ground. He sat there, trembling.

Toby Bell remained seated, his heavy-featured face scowling.

"Ladies first," Miles Gimpler said. Lou Winters stood up and closed one eye at Hart in a careful wink, then she climbed from the stage. Hart followed behind her, then Miles Gimpler came down to the road with Toby Bell behind him. The big outlaw kept his frown in place, and his eyes narrow and mean.

"What the hell," Toby growled.

"You said it, sucker," the bearded holdup man echoed with a coarse laugh. He thrust the heavy Colt forward, pulled off his hat. "Money, watches an' rings," he demanded. "Make it sudden."

Miles Gimpler pulled his heavy gold watch and chain, dropped it into the hat. He followed it with a wad of bills, some silver coins. "That's it," he said, mockingly. "The damned watch never kept time anyway."

"That's the spirit," the highwayman grinned. "You next, fatso."

Toby Bell said nothing, but emptied his pockets. His eyes moved with the bandit. Doc Kline dumped in his cash, his hands trembling. Hart pulled his pocket inside out, tossed in the few silver coins he had kept. "Clean," he said.

The bearded man spat to one side. "You goddamned piker," he grunted, and swung the Navy Colt in a vicious arc. Hart saw the blow coming, rolled with it, but the long barrel connected with the side of his head, and blackness rolled in upon him and he went down. The outlaw's booted toes dug savagely into his side, and the pain of the blow cleared his head.

Hart came up like the pounce of a cat, then held there. The Navy gun was levelled at his waist, the hammer back. Hart forced himself to relax. "Your deal, friend," he said in flat-toned voice.

"You can say that again," the bearded man returned. He swung around to the girl and grinned.

"Hello, Curly," Lou Winters said. "I'm broke. Run out of Denver without a dime. Feel like staking a girl?"

The bandit grinned wider, then shook his head, slowly. Behind him, atop a high boulder that overlooked the stage sat a second and smaller man, a rifle in his arms trained on Bill Wadden.

"Wish I could, Lou, but not this time," the bandit said. "My pard would throw a fit. I'll settle for a kiss."

Hart saw her lips move in a smile that was gesture with-

out meaning. But her voice was without warmth: "You're the man with the gun."

"I sure am!" Curly grinned.

Hart moved and the man atop the boulder yelled and brought the rifle to bear on Hart. Caven held there. Curly wiped at his tobacco-stained lips, then put an arm around the girl's waist. She let him pull her roughly to him and kiss her. Then he let her go and stepped back.

"I'll see you again baby," he said.

"Be sure you've got your gun, Curly," she answered, and there was no humor in her tone. But the outlaw laughed as if at a huge joke.

"Okay, reckon our business is done. Get on that rattlin' jenny—you, Wadden! Get her to rollin'!"

They piled back into the stage and Hart swung the door closed. The bandit yelled, fired his gun. Bill Wadden let out a string of curses, and the lurch of the stage hurled them back in their seats. For a moment there was rough going, then Wadden got the team settled back on the road, and it was smoother.

The girl met Hart's eyes levelly. "I could have screamed and fainted," she said, softly. "But it wouldn't have mattered to Curly."

Hart said, flatly: "We all make our own values."

Miles Gimpler looked from one to the other. "There are different kinds of courage, Hart," he said, mildly.

Toby Bell was clenching one big fist. "Suckered," he said, bitterly. "Suckered, by God, by a lousy hill rider."

The girl held out her hand, and Hart took his money back. "Thanks," he said.

"For nothing," she returned. "I could dislike you very much, Mr. Caven. Your back is too stiff. It will bend one of these days—or it will break."

Miles Gimpler laughed. "You saved the wrong cash. *I* would have appreciated it."

"Curly was too blind to spot that money-belt you're

wearing, Miles," the girl returned. She flashed a quick look at Hart. "Here's a present for you."

She held the heavy gold chain of the watch in her hand, the gold turnip-cased watch in her palm. Miles Gimpler took it, held it up, and his smile was wide. "I'll be damned," he said, softly.

Lou Winters was looking at Hart. He read the anger for him inside her, and it made its mark. He looked away, and it made an end between them of what might have been. He thought of the brief warmth of her body in his arms, of the softness of her lips pressed against his, her passion answering his in that sudden, blind moment, and he felt the beginning of a regret that would grow. But this way it would go no further; of that he could be sure. Or thought he could.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It Was Mid-afternoon, with the long shadows of the peaks spreading across the gulch, when the Denver stage came into Thunder Rock. To Hart Caven the arrival held a strange significance, but one he could not analyze. He saw the scattered gray tents that spread up the sharp slope of Devil's Run; the few frame buildings that fronted the main street on the benchland beside the sharply outjutting shoulder of rock that gave the town its name. Below the town proper ran the rock-whipped waters of Walker's Creek. Bearded men thronged the main street, and a steady traffic of wagons of all descriptions slowed the pace of the stage up-canyon. The sloping walls of the gulch were dotted with the yellow mounds of mine tailings where shafts were being driven into the loose rock of the run.

The Denver stage pulled up in front of a false-faced frame building that lifted at the rear up the slope of the canyon wall. Toby Bell glowered out the window and spat lustily to the ground beyond. "Made it, by God!" he growled.

Doc Kline said: "Amen."

Hart got up stiffly, swung open the door beside him and climbed out. He lifted his hand to Lou Winters as she came out. Her head lifted and she looked at the dingy squalor of the camp, and if there was any dismay at what she saw, she did not show it.

"Thunder Rock," she said, softly, and her jaw set more firmly as if at a challenge she faced.

Doc Kline scurried out behind her as Bill Wadden clambered down from his perch. The driver was grinning widely. "Gold fever," he said. "I can smell it. There's been a real strike."

Miles Gimpler climbed out quietly. He studied the sprawling town then looked at Lou Winters with his wry smile. "Boom or bust," he said, "this is it."

Toby Bell came down quickly. His face was hard set, his mouth an angry line. "I got business," he said, and stamped away.

Bill Wadden unlaced the luggage boot and tossed the canvas up out of the way. He handed Doc Kline two bags. "Neely House over there—rooms an' best meals in town."

A man in shirt-sleeves came out of the frame building Wadden gestured at and stepped from the boardwalk to the dust of the street. His bald head was oily with sweat.

"Hi, Bill," he called out. "On time for once. You're going to be busy. The Mule Head's made it—running a thousand dollars to the ton. Only one of a dozen real finds. You're going to see something here in Nevada Gulch now."

Wadden grinned. "You're right, but not the way you think. I've made my last run, Tatum. Goin' to try my luck again. Been waitin' since Fifty-Nine for some real honest-to-God color to show."

"You'll find it here," Tatum grunted. "You folks go on in. Dinner's cookin'. Dollar a plate. No beds left. Town's filling up."

Hart Caven was aware of Lou Winters' attention and knew she was waiting for him to speak. His mouth tightened.

With his arrival at Thimble Rock, the old urge to start his train was stronger, more possessive, leaving expression to any other emotion. There could be no point in saying his goodbyes so he turned away without speaking.

Lou Winters watched him go in silence then Miles Dampier took her arm. She turned to look up at him. Her smile was hard and bright. "All right, Miles," she said. "Now we'll play our own game."

Hart Caven moved along the street. There were brief stretches of boardwalk in front of some of the more permanent structures, and the growing town was filled with the sounds of construction, the pounding of hammers, the squeal of ungreased rope blocks as framework walls went up, the threnodic sounds of hard-working men. Freight wagons rumbled down the narrow street, churning dust, laden with supplies, lumber, all the materials required for the establishment of a new camp, and driven by men who had chosen the slower but more certain way to fortune. Most of the buildings were made with clapboard siding that ran up to shoulder-height; the rest of the wall and the roof were canvas. The street itself was thronged with men carrying packs, moving through the town, toward the hills beyond. And the talk was only of gold.

The last building at the head of Walker Street was the Good Fortune Saloon, a brush-walled, tarpaulin-topped structure that appeared as if the first strong wind would whip it bodily down the canyon. There was no door, and Hart stepped inside. The stink of sour beer, the smell of sweating men came at him sickeningly. The square room was jammed with men, but he worked his way to the bar, a twenty-foot plank thrown across a series of whisky barrels. Five bartenders were working like madmen.

At tables around the room men were gambling. At a deal table set against the far wall sat a man who worked a pair of assayer's scales. Miners stood in line to have their pokes weighed. At the bar a pinch of dust was worth a quarter. Hart laid a silver dollar down, received a schooner

of beer and no change. He picked up his beer and moved through the crowded room. He paused briefly at a faro table, watched a turn, and moved on.

Fifteen minutes later, the beer gone, Hart was convinced the two men he sought were not present, and he left the Good Fortune, went to the next saloon. There were nine of them along Walker Street, and it took him three hours to visit them all. It was dark when he finished, and kerosene flares burned outside the tent-roofed buildings. The traffic of the street had not diminished, seemed instead to have increased.

He stood at the corner and surveyed the town. Lights twinkled up both slopes of the canyon, and the steady stream of ore wagons rumbled down the steep grade of the gulch. It surged about him, a steady, growing thing, a voice of empire, of raw violence, and as Hart stood rooted there, caught briefly in its spell, strange new longings stirred in him. He shook his head somberly and dug into his vest pocket for a cheroot. He lighted it, puffing slowly and evenly.

For some obscure reason, remembering was easy just then. With the clean fresh smell of the mountain wind about him he could remember the stench of Andersonville, the fetid reek of open burial trenches, clogged with flaccid figures that had once been men. And one of them had been Davey . . . His hands knotted at his sides. Dolman and Thaddus. Doctor Leo Dolman, and Captain Keenan Thaddus. Doctor Dolman who used muddy creek water instead of the smallpox vaccine he sold for gold. Andersonville had meant no more to him than an opportunity to grow rich. And Captain Thaddus of the quiet voice and the steady hands who carried out Commandant Wirz's orders to the letter, even when it meant setting a pack of hounds to tear a living man to bloody shreds.

Hart closed his eyes and tried to bring the faces of the two men he sought to a bright, clear focus, but somehow they blurred. It had been too long, and he had been too

feverish to remember clearly. He had not forgotten, but details were vague, and somehow it made a jarring emptiness grow inside him. His jaw tightened. "*I'll know them!*" he whispered, grimly, just as he had known Farley that night on the railroad right-of-way. But doubts still assailed him. He had known Farley better, had seen him day after day—Sergeant Farley who liked to see sick men groveling on the slimy ground, begging him for their wormy rations of cornmeal gruel. Farley had died too quickly, too painlessly, Hart reflected bitterly.

Once more he considered the town. The soft light filtering through dingy canvas roofs and walls, the smell of pinewood smoke, he hustle of many men, coarse laughter, the tinny whanging of a banjo somewhere, a dog's shattering barks. A gun went off in the distance followed by a man's wildly elated yells.

"There's time," Hart said to himself. No matter how long it would take, it would come sometime. The thought was grimly reassuring inside him as he crossed the street, avoiding the lumbering wagons that filled it. Up above the main street there resounded a clattering bang as loads of talus were dumped on the tailings of the Mule Head Mine. He stepped up to a section of boardwalk laid in front of the High Grade Saloon as a man came out through the swinging doors, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. It was Toby Bell. The outlaw recognized Hart, but walked past without speaking.

The brief time in which their separate lives had been joined had ended. Hart thought of this. Five outcasts, unwanted by even the frontier society of Denver, dumped off at road's end, each to go his separate way to the destinies that awaited them. Hart thought of Lou Winters and the odd feeling her eyes gave him, and shook his head. He felt oddly alone, more so than in years. He recognized it as the penalty he must pay for his interest in the woman and shrugged it away. He crossed the boardwalk and pushed through the swinging doors of the saloon.

The cheap red whisky known as "Texas Lightning" made a warmth inside Toby Bell and added fuel to the blaze of anger that gripped him. He had spent his last silver coin for the whisky, and while being broke was not an unusual circumstance in his hectic life, the manner in which it had occurred still rankled within him.

Thought of the two men who had held up the stage made him frown. "Goddamn shorthorns," Toby muttered sullenly as he let his narrowed eyes take in the length of Walker Street. He followed the surge of men up-canyon, enjoyed the feeling of belonging, of being a part of this wild thing that filled the mountain passages with desperate, searching gold-hunters. Not that Toby was inclined to take an active part in the search for gold; it had been years since his hands had felt the bite of a shovel handle, and he saw no reason for changing his ways now.

A man of many parts, Toby Bell had spent the early years of his life in Texas, and the fact he could never return was, in a way, his mark of achievment there. A rope waited for Toby Bell in Texas—and a hundred hands quite eager to pull on it. He grinned crookedly at the thought. The years had taught Toby Bell many things, among them the simple truth that it requires some effort for a man to be what he thinks he is; and to Toby's mind he was something special, and he worked hard in his own way to prove it. Evidence of his success lay in the fact he was not alone in his estimate of himself as more than one peace officer of various Western states could testify. The activities that had engrossed Toby Bell in these latter years were no more and no less than a continuation of the things he had learned during the early years of the Civil War under Quantrell in Kansas. Strike hard and fast, take what you want and leave no witnesses; that was his creed and one he had done nobly by.

He finished his long look at the busy street of Thunder Rock, then moved to the end of the boardwalk. The night wind was turning cold, and he pulled his linsey-wool jacket

tighter across his chest but did not button it. Thrust into his belt, an accustomed hardness against his rounding belly bulge, by a Navy Colt. It was a gun he could trust, and while he had had it converted to fire the new Smith and Wesson self-contained cartridges this past year, it was his only concession to modernity. His right hand moved to touch the bone handles of the gun, then dropped to his side.

Reaching the end of the boardwalk he paused. There was no one in his immediate vicinity; the single rider who walked his horse down the street had his head down to his chest, half asleep. Taking quick advantage of the momentary lull in the steady flow of traffic up-canyon, Toby Bell stepped lightly around the corner of the saloon, put his back to the clapboard walls and waited. A faintly pink glow came through the canvas wall above his head, but by hunkering down he stood in comparitive blackness.

Minutes went by slowly, Toby Bell did not stir. Men entered and left the saloon, and he saw them pass the mouth of the narrow opening between the buildings. But still he waited. It grew later. The uproar in the High Grade settled down to a steady murmuring. Then, through the canvas top he caught a deep-voiced man's heavy laughter and good-night call. Toby straightened and moved closer to the corner of the building.

Poised there he heard feet thumping on the boardwalk. He took a quick look out into the street. The lull held; there was one passing ore wagon, rumbling loudly. For the instant, the street was almost empty, and a man's shadow spilled across the ground in front of the alleyway. Then the man who cast it came even with the opening. Toby's arm shot out, caught the man, drew him off-balance. Bell's right hand brought the long-barrelled Colt down in a chopping motion, and it laid across the man's skull with a satisfying *thwunk!* Toby caught the man's weight as he fell, and let him sag to the dirt, careful that his feet did not thrust out past the darkness of the alley passageway.

With swift, practised movements of his hands, Toby

cleaned the man's pockets. He was rewarded by a heavy leather poke and some loose coins. He thrust the loot into the side pocket of his coat, and without hurrying stepped out of the alleyway into Walker Street with the air of a man who had taken care of a natural call. A miner came hurrying past him, anxious to get into the High Grade. Toby Bell grinned at him, and feeling very much that things were beginning to return to normal, turned down the street.

Doctor Erasmus Kline, carrying his heavy black portmanteau, saw Toby Bell emerge from the space between the buildings, and his small, intent face sharpened. Something about Toby's boistrous air warned him, and he shrank back against the side of the building until the big man had swaggered away. Then Doc Kline came forward.

A loud groan issuing from the narrow alleyway stopped him, and he hesitated. A man staggered out, gripping the corner of the building to support his weight, his bearded face bloody, his eyes dazed.

"Pole-axed, by God!" the man muttered. "Like a goddamn steer."

He shook his head and blood spattered the clapboard wall. He put one hand up to his macerated scalp, brought it away with another groan. He saw Doc Kline, glared at him uncertainly.

"You—runt—you see a man come out of here?"

Doc Kline drew back. "No, but you're hurt. Better let me see that head of yours—"

"Get away from me, damn you," the man cursed and came forward to stand in the dirt of the street and stare uncertainly up and down. But Toby Bell was long gone from sight. Still cursing, his legs wobbly under him, the slugged miner walked back to the High Grade and turned in.

Doc Kline turned to look once more in the direction that Toby Bell had taken, pursed his lips in a silent whistle, then went on his way. He walked until he reached the end

of the main section of Walker Street, found the crossroad that angled down to the creek below the town, and made his way carefully along it. He left the road at the creek, followed the rocky bed of the stream up the canyon a quarter-mile, then halted where a flat boulder lay half in and half out of the rushing water.

Here he made his preparations. He laid his black case on the dry half of the rock and opened it carefully. Rows of small bottles were carefully packed in the upper half: a half-gallon spouted can lay in the bottom along with an odd assortment of cans carefully labelled in Latin. Most of the latter were empty, the cost of refilling them with the original ingredients too prohibitive for even a careful man like Erasmus Kline to consider. He shook his head dourly and cursed the luck that had made five Denver miners have the same complaint and lay the cause to his elixir. Unfortunate coincidence, but Doctor Kline knew his product too well to doubt that it had been anything more than that. Still, Thunder Rock appeared to be in the grip of a sudden rush, and opportunity was made to be grasped according to Doc Kline's line of reasoning.

Carrying the half-gallon can, he crossed the flat rock gingerly to the creek and laying it on its side scooped it two-thirds full of water. This he carried back and stood upright. He searched the tails of his Prince Albert and found his last pint of red whisky almost half empty. He held it up, fought temptation to gain needed courage, and emptied it philosophically into the can. He then opened several of the small closed tins, sniffing them to be sure of their contents in the darkness. He dropped in a pinch of this, a measure of that, and finally satisfied that he had done the best he could with the materials at hand, closed the spouted half-gallon can and shook it vigorously.

Using a small metal funnel, Doc Kline filled a dozen of the little bottles, laid them carefully to one side and straightened up. There was an ache in the small of his back, and he grimaced as he rubbed at it. A raw edge

of longing nibbled at his consciousness; he needed a drink—needed it badly. The long trip from Denver had drained much of his meager supply of strength. He studied the filled bottles thoughtfully, then smiled. This would be another start; he would have money to jingle in his pockets, money to buy food and lodging—and, yes, even drink within moderation. Moderation. He liked the word. It covered, even from himself, the craving that had destroyed everything in life for him but what little he had left.

But the urge to drink was too strong to waste time mulling over his own problems, and Doc Kline hurriedly repacked his case, stowed away the filled bottles, and turned away from the creek.

He made his way back to Walker Street, moving with his usual care, and upon reaching the street again, studied it for some time. The town was still teeming with activity. Men and wagons surged up and down the narrow street. Two men were standing in front of the little tent, laughing to themselves as they waited.

Doc Kline picked his location carefully. Two kerosene flares stood in front of the Good Colour Saloon, and there he made his way. The yellow-red light flickered against the clapboard wall of the saloon, and here he made his pitch. He took four narrow telescoping legs from the black case, fitted them to sockets set in the bottom, and raised the lid. He unfolded and set up a dingy banner that read: DOCTOR ERASMUS KLINE'S WONDER ELIXIR.

Two or three loungers watched his preparations with good humor, and Doc Kline settled to his work. He was seized by a sudden, terrifying fit of coughing that wracked him—bent him double. Gasping for breath, he reached within the case, brought forth a small bottle and unscrewed the top. Fighting for strength, he raised it to his lips and spilled some into his mouth. He swallowed with effort—and instantly straightened erect, smiling, the coughing spasm defeated completely.

"Powerful stuff," he said loudly. "Mighty powerful."

The three watchers had grown to four. They were eyeing him. He replaced the bottle with a flamboyant gesture, looked at them.

"My friends," he said, "you have just witnessed a miracle—one of the few your eyes will ever behold. Fifteen years ago I was given six months to live by the greatest doctors in the East. What do you guess my age as being? Fifty?" He laughed, scornfully. "I am proud to state to you I am seventy-two years old, and capable of as much hard work as any twenty-year old!"

He brought up a bottle and held it for the light to flicker upon it. It was a pale reddish color, glinting oddly inside the glass. The four onlookers had grown to nine, and they were interested despite their wary smiles.

"Come, come," he chided, gently. "I am making no sales pitch. I have but arrived in your fair—er—camp. My purpose is not monetary gain, but the easement of mankind's ills. I have a mission—a sacred mission to pass along the knowledge I have gained to do as much for others as has been done for myself. The secrets of ages reside in this bottle. The closely-guarded secret of the Ancients." He stared at them, his eyes wide with wonder. "We have all heard of the mysterious Egypt—of the bodies of men, still life like after thousands of years of burial. That secret was believed lost until, at the very doorstep of Death itself, I rediscovered it." He flourished the bottle.

Under the spell of his resonant voice, the men about him moved closer. One asked: "Sounds like potent medicine, Doc. How much?"

Doc Kline whirled on the speaker instantly. "For you, friend—nothing." He thrust the small bottle into the man's surprised hand. "Except the very slight service charge of seventy-five cents which will be refunded instantly if my elixir does not make you a new man." He raised his head to stare at the others. "Seventy-five cents is a ridiculous price, you say? I know that, gentlemen! Less than the price of the red-eyed liquor that will rot your soul and body. But

I am not here to make a profit—may the gods forbid any man's wilfull misuse of such a secret benefit to mankind. No, I ask merely that you help in a small part to defray the actual cost of manufacture. I will suffer the loss as a part of my repayment of the tremendous debt of thanks I owe another!"

His voice had grown darkly mysterious as if he shared with them a secret only a few could hope to possess. The man who had taken the bottle stared at it, and like a man entranced, dug into his pants pocket and brought forth a silver dollar. Doc Kline scooped it up and it vanished into a pocket of his coat.

"Thank you, noble sir!" he intoned. "Your generosity will not be forgotten. Now if there are among you others a man who is troubled by bodily ills, by mental stress and strain, by tired, aching feet, a plaguing cold in the head—I promise him surcease and ease."

The man who had paid a dollar looked sheepishly around him, then shuffled away—as Doc Kline had expected—without his change. The others came up, first one, then two more, then all of them, money outstretched. Doc Kline's initial supply of "elixir" diminished rapidly.

Twenty minutes later Doctor Erasmus Kline was aglow with a feeling of accomplishment and a reborn self-confidence. He closed his black case with care, readjusted his hat to a more dignified angle on his small head, and prepared to remove himself from the scene of his victory. The craving for drink seemed to be reluctantly under the control of this new-found ebulliance, and Doc Kline found himself dreaming dreams that had been empty mockeries for years.

This is a beginning. It is a step that shall carry me far. No more the follies of life to plague me. I shall stand firm against them.

It kindled a flame of righteousness in his meager bosom, and he passed the first saloon with high-lifted head as a man who had put temptation firmly behind him. Tomorrow he would refill his stock of elixir. Tomorrow he would make

a beginning here in Thunder Rock that would carry him on to a brightly roseate future. Tomorrow . . .

Toby Bell stepped from the swinging doors of a saloon directly into his path. He recognized Doc Kline and grinned. The angry mood of the afternoon had worn away from Toby, and he was in high good spirits.

"Hiya, Doc!" he said, loudly. "By God, it's good to see you again. You shared your liquor with me on the stage—now I'm buyin' you all the rotgut you can hold."

Doc Kline felt his resolution weaken, but held it firmly in check and shook his head. "Not tonight, Toby," he said, firmly. "Thank you, but I am a busy man. More, a man who has seen the light of blessed serenity, a man who can refuse the moral temptations of this life with firm resolve, a man who—"

"A man who can talk more'n any six women who ever lived," Toby Bell cut in. "Hell, Doc, you gettin' deaf? I said I was buyin'."

The outlaw grasped Doc Kline's thin arm and turned him around. Despite the smaller man's protests—which grew less vehement—he steered him into the nearest saloon and to the plank bar. There was a bitter resentment within Doctor Erasmus Kline, not for the man who had brought him here, but for his own weakness in allowing himself to come. But whisky was an emollient superior even to Doctor Kline's Wonder Elixir, and its spell was swift and binding. He stood at the bar and drank, and somehow it did not really matter. Tomorrow was another day in which to be stronger, another day in which to dream. No one noticed when the little man in the ragglетaggle Prince Albert silently began to cry.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Marcus Grimes finished the last of his thin, tough steak and looked at the woman across the table from him. Her eyes were half closed, and in repose her face lost something

of hardness, took on something finer that Miles could not name. He studied her in silence until she looked directly at him and the spell of the moment was broken.

"We will both remember the terms of our agreement, Miles," Lou Winters said.

"I do not forget easily," he returned. "I was just admiring you, my dear. Wondering why you are what you are, and wondering what you will become. I have seen strange things."

She made a shrugging motion with her slim shoulders. Miles spooned sugar into his third cup of coffee and stirred it slowly. His thick hands produced a black cheroot. He bit off the end and lighted it.

"First we will purchase a lot; then erect a clapboard frame, buy a tarp to stretch over it for a roof . . ." He paused. "It will take time."

She shook her head. The firmness of her chin held him. Her eyes were a dark green, glistening in the glow of the lamps set about the dining room. "Time is money," she said. "There is a quicker way. There are buildings already built."

He nodded. "And men who own them. Men who want money for their holdings."

Her smile came fleet and hard. "You have a stake. This is a gamble. Slow or fast it is still a gamble. I would rather have it fast. How much money do you have, Miles?"

He blew smoke out between them, studied her through it. "A little over two thousand iron men," he answered, soberly. "Look, Lou—"

"You are in this, or you are not," she said flatly. "Make up your mind, Miles."

"All right. I'm in. It's your deal. I hope you hold the aces."

"We will see." She moved her chair back and stood up. "What's the biggest place in town?"

It was his turn to shrug. "I'd pick Harry Kreb's Honest Dealer," he said. "It's a double spread and it cost him money. He brought forty wagons west from Independence loaded with equipment. He sold half the lot in Denver to

raise the money he's put into the Honest Dealer." He thought about the matter some more, his eyes clouded, and then he sighed and removed the cheroot from between his lips. "Perhaps you are right. It will take some doing—but maybe it can be done. I can try. You stay here at the hotel. I'll see that you get a room. It will be late when it's over."

He held there hoping for a breaking in the iron reserve of the woman, his hope visible in a tightening about his mouth that smoothed suddenly away when he was disappointed. His wry smile came into place, and he turned and walked out of the dining room.

Cart Tatum's bald pate was oily, shining in the light from a green-glass shaded lamp where he was bent over the desk in the center of the small lobby of the Neely House. He didn't look up as Gimpler approached. He was reading a ragged three-months old Chicago newspaper.

"You found out who won the war, yet?" Miles asked.

Tatum looked up and grinned. He answered: "Reckon I'll be gettin' that paper next mouth."

Gimpler smiled. One thick hand went into the pocket of his tight trousers. It came out and a thick golden coin lay in his palm. "Twenty dollar bet you haven't got a room for a lone woman. The town's crowded."

Tatum squinted thoughtfully at the coin. "I'd have to give her my own room to win that bet."

Gimpler laid the coin down. "I never mind losing a bet to a gentleman," he said.

Tatum blinked again at the coin. "Well," he said. Then, again: "Well . . ."

Miles Gimpler nodded. "Reckon a room's worth five dollars a night on top of the bet." He dug out a twin to the first coin and laid it down.

The hotel keeper grunted and put his hand out, laid it atop the two coins and rubbed them together with his fingers. "You just lost a bet," he said. "My room's under the stairs. It ain't big, but it's safe enough. No lock but

there's a slip-bolt on the door, an' the window's got an iron screen over it outside."

Miles smiled his wry smile and nodded again. "Tell Miss Winters she has a room. I'll be back later. I'll take a cot or I'll sleep in the stable. It doesn't matter."

He turned around, crossed the lobby to the open door and went out to the street. He stood at the edge of the boardwalk and finished the cheroot, letting the cool night wind touch his face. He felt a strange stirring. It was something new, a rebirth of something he had almost forgotten, and it pleased him. He placed no value upon it, nor did he examine it closely; it existed, and that was enough for now.

The Honest Dealer stood at the corner. It sported an unpainted false front and stood higher than any other building in the gulch. The skeleton framework of an uncompleted upper story was outlined against the pinkish-glowing canvas top. Slatted swinging doors, carried in wagons from St. Louis, stood in a long row along the crowded boardwalk. Flaming kerosene flares burned away the night, and two barkers shouted to the passing men.

Miles Gimpler watched the play, studied the street and the crowd that jammed the building, then shook his head and sighed again. He flipped the cheroot away and crossed the street. He went through a pair of swinging doors and noise belted him in the face like the blow of a fist. Against a back wall was an improvised plank-floored stage, and a tall, heavily built girl was showing her flabby legs while she sang a song. Heavy shouts and applause greeted the end of her recital, and she smirked out across the smoky room and began another song.

For a moment Gimpler stood there, then made his way to the plank bar. Two sections of mahogany bar stood out from the back wall, and planks laid across whisky barrels finished the eighty foot span of the bar. Every inch of it was crowded. Twelve sweating bartenders did their best but it was not good enough. A fight broke out in the center of the room, overturning two card tables, but went unnoticed

by the majority of the men present. Bouncers moved in purposefully, and Gimpler approved of their swift action, the way the bedling men were parted and run out through the double swinging doors.

He waited his turn at the bar, got a schooner of bitter beer and sipped at it. His eyes darted busily about the room. There was a doorway at the back of the place and twice he saw bartenders pass through it. He finished his beer and made his way down the length of the bar to the door. He rapped sharply upon it, then shoved it open. There was a hallway beyond with doors opening off. One door opened and a man stuck his head out.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

Gimpler said: "Harry."

The man nodded. "Last door on the right."

Gimpler moved down the long hall. It ran across the back of the saloon, separating the big room from the rear section of the building. He passed an open door and the odor of cooking food struck at him. He pursed his lips in a silent whistle. Harry Kreb had a good thing going. The thought made Gmpler smile. He found the right door, knocked on it, then opened it.

A man seated at a wide desk looked up with a frown. He was big, his face a sullen red mask, his eyes narrow and mean. Savagery was a stamp upon him, and a force within him. He used it as a tool to gain his ends. There was recognition but no surprise in his face. He said, flatly: "What do you want, Gimpler?"

Miles let his wry smile slide into place. "Action, Harry," he replied.

The big man frowned, then closed a thick ledger that lay open on the desk. He shoved his chair back and stood up. "There are tables open outside."

Gimpler said: "I want action not children's games."

Harryq Kreb blinked his mean eyes. "I've known you five months, Gimpler. You're not the type. You're up to something. Denver get too hot to hold you?"

"It was coming to that. I didn't wait for it." Miles moved into the room and closed the door. "You always have a big game going. I want to sit in."

Harry Kreb blinked his mean eyes. "I've known you four. He shrugged. "A pigeon's a pigeon," he said finally. "Come back in an hour and bring your stake with you."

"I'll be back," Miles answered, and returned to the hall. He retraced his way, reentered the uproar of the saloon.

He killed the hour at the bar, watching the play at the tables with professional interest. He figured the house percentages in his head and his smile widened. The hour passed and he saw three men go through the back door, but took his time following them. They were already seated around Harry Kreb's private poker table when he came into the back room. Harry greeted him with a grin.

"Here's the man who wants action, boys," he said. "Miles Gimpler, late of Denver—Pete Miller. Henry Deal. Paul Andrews."

Gimpler nodded and took an empty chair.

"Table stakes, gentlemen," Krebs said. He poured whisky into glasses, brought them to the table. "Dealer's choice, fresh cards when you want them—and liquor on the house."

Pete Miller was a dour man with the stamp of a rider on his weather-beaten features. "You talk too much, Kreb," he said. "I'll break the seal on them bicycles."

Kreb laid a new pack of cards on the table and took a chair. A Mexican came in and closed the door behind him. He refilled the whisky glasses.

Henry Deal sat to Gimpler's left, a squat, hard-faced man. His hands were thick and heavily calloused. No stranger to a single-jack or the backbreaking toil of a miner, Gimpler thought.

Paul Andrews was the easiest marked of the lot. A professional gambler, Gimpler thought, and probably a shill for Kreb. Insurance for the house. Gimpler's smile set into place. Crowd Andrews and he'd backwater fast without the go-ahead from Kreb. Gimpler filed this thought for reference.

A hand was dealt, and Gimpler studied each player. He made no effort to win. Andrews backed water gently when pushed and played it close; Miller liked to plunge, and would break quick. Henry Deal was harder to judge; he played them tight, then abruptly plunged, with no pattern to his play. It worried Gimpler. Harry Kreb was the quiet professional, a man who would back his own judgment to the limit. He took three pots without bluffing once, laying his winning hand down slowly and methodically. He had one fault, a slight hesitation when raised, a careful balancing of his hand against the importance of the stake. Gimpler thought he could tell when Kreb decided to bluff, and was satisfied.

The Mexican refilled the glasses and handed a box of cigars around. The small room was blue with smoke. Pete Miller leaned back in his chair. "If I wanted forty dollar pots, I'd be out front with the rest of the trade."

"Your poison, Pete," Andrews said. His dark eyes shifted quickly to Kreb's face. He laid the cards in front of the rancher. Miller picked them up. Then with a quick gesture of his hands, ripped them across. The Mexican laid a new pack in front of him.

Miller shuffled the pack. He pushed a twenty-dollar gold piece to the center of the green cloth that covered the table. "Jacks or better," he said. He dealt out a hand. Nobody opened. There was two hundred dollars on the table. Gimpler opened on the next deal. He was raised twice. He took three cards, grabbed a pair of sixes and bet one hundred dollars.

Miller chuckled. "This is what I came for. Up a hundred."

Kreb stayed as did Henry Deal. Andrews dropped out. Gimpler frowned, then laid his cards face up to show his openers. Kreb smiled his hard smile at Miller. "It lays between us, Pete."

"That it does," the rancher said grinning, and laid down three fives. Kreb shrugged and threw his cards into the discard pile. "Somebody wins, somebody loses," he said.

It was Kreb's deal. He dealt slowly, carefully. He laid

each card down in front of the players. His eyes met Paul Andrews' briefly. Gimpler noted the exchange and picked up his own cards. He held three aces. He heard Miller suck in his breath.

Kreb picked up his cards slowly, and ranged them in his hand. His eyes narrowed, and he pulled at his cigar. Andrews said: "I open." He laid out a twenty-dollar gold piece. They all stayed. Gimpler drew a six and a three Miller shook his head and said: "I'll play these."

Andrews bet twenty; Deal upped it a hundred. Gimpler called. Miller chuckled. "I like it sweet," he said. "Five hundred more."

Kreb frowned at his cards. "Steep," he said. "But this I've got to see." He called the bet. Andrews chewed at his lower lip, frowned at his hand, then laid it down face up "This is no company for two lonely ladies. Queens for openers."

Henry Deal's expression remained the same. "And a hundred," he said. He pushed money into the growing pile.

"It's up to you, Miles," Kreb said. His eyes were blank of expression.

"I've had it," Gimpler said. "I'm in no hurry." He threw in his three aces.

Miller called the bet, raised it five hundred more. That made nearly three thousand dollars in the pot. There was a fine rim of sweat across Miller's leather-skinned face. Kreb said: "This is too good to miss. It's worth the money." He called the bet.

Henry Deal's blunt-fingered hands stacked double-eagles neatly. "I'll call too," he said.

Miller chuckled. His eyes were bright. His hands trembled as he turned his cards over, one at a time. "Three nines, two sevens. Full house to beat."

The man who owned the Honest Dealer laughed. "I thought you walked on high ground, Pete," he said. He turned over his hand. He held four jacks. He looked at the

square-faced miner, and Henry Deal shrugged. "I pass." He threw in his hand.

Miller had gone pale. He wiped at his mouth. His hands were visibly shaking. Kreb said: "You win and you lose. It's not your night, Pete. Or maybe it's early yet."

The rancher stared at the golden coins that Kreb raked in. He shook his head then forced a laugh. "I can use a drink—and a new deal."

Play resumed, but with small pots going and coming, turnabout. Like boxers in a finish fight, Gimpler thought, feeling their way in the early rounds, opening up a little to test their opponent, then settling back to wait for the opportunity to land the killing punch. For Gimpler, luck came and went; he lost a little, won more with one good hand. At a guess, he was a couple of hundred dollars ahead of the game. But for Pete Miller, luck had run out; he lost steadily, and drank heavily. His playing became erratic, and he bluffed openly and his angry voice became slurred.

Gimpler caught a glance exchanged by Harry Kreb and his shill, Andrews. The freeze-out was now due, Miles thought, and eased his shoulders in the hard chair. It was past midnight and the room was thick with cigar smoke. The Mexican kept the glasses filled with whisky, but Gimpler only emptied his twice.

It was Kreb's deal. He shuffled and laid the cards out slowly. Gimpler saw nothing in the movement of those casual hands to warn him, and admired the man's deliberate ease. Gimpler picked up his cards; he held two pair, kings and fives. Sucker-bait, he thought, savagely. He lighted a cheroot, eased his weight in the chair and closed his eyes.

Miller grunted and glared about the table. Andrews said, "By me."

Gimpler smiled his dead smile. "Me, too," he said. He caught Kreb's quick, studied look. Henry Deal opened for twenty dollars. His rocklike face had not changed. Miller licked at his mouth, put his gold pieces into the pot.

Miles Gimpler separated his cards slowly, keeping just the

too low. "Take these cards." He saw Kreb's quick glance again, and the gambler was frowning now. But he laid the three cards down carefully in front of Gimpler. Miles thought: *Looks the bastard—he doesn't know what I've got now, unless he's slicker that I think.*

Miller gasped. He drank quickly from his whisky glass. Set it down empty. Henry Deal bet forty dollars. Gimpler nodded, slowly, and eased his cards into his hand. Nothing. Just the pair of fives that counted. He looked at his cards, let his eyebrows move as if surprised. He counted out seven double eagles.

"My turn to jump," he said. "Up a hundred."

Kreb shot him another look. The frown on his face narrowed his eyes. Meanness lay upon him like a blanket, almost visible.

Pete Miller rubbed his mouth with the back of his right hand. He blinked his eyes. He looked at each man in turn. His smile was twisted. "You haven't started to sweeten it yet. I say up a thousand more."

Kreb studied his cards, then called. Andrews threw his cards into the discard with a mock show of disgust. Henry Deal pursed his lips. "I'll see it," he said, and pushed money forward.

Gimpler opened his cards, read them again. He blinked as if still surprised. "I wanted action. I like it. Five hundred more." His pile of money diminished sharply.

Miller cursed savagely, and glared at his hand. His fingers trembled. He hesitated, then said: "I'll call."

Gimpler laid his eyes upon Kreb. His round face was innocent, but his eyes were laughing. Kreb read something in them he didn't like, and he poked at the corner of his mouth with one finger. *He's worried,* Miles thought.

"All right, Miles," Harry Kreb said slowly. "I'll see you—and five hundred more."

The hard-rock man grunted. "My curiosity just died," he growled. He threw his cards away.

Miles Gimpler fingered his money. He had more than

sixteen hundred dollars in the pot when he called Kreb's raise. "Short and sweet," he said, lightly. "One more thousand, I feel the itch I can't scratch."

Miller choked on his whisky. He wiped at his mouth. His eyes seemed dulled. He shook his head. "Godamn it to hell," he mumbled. "Makin' a three-card draw. You're not crazy. You've got it made. I'm through. Two pair to open." He showed them, tossed them away.

Tension came then. It was a silent humming in the smoky air; it was a stiffness in the backs of the men around the table. Andrews scraped his chair back.

"Christ, I'm stiff," he said.

"Sit back down, damn you!" Miles flashed. The shill looked at him, then at Kreb. He sat back down sullenly.

"You're a touchy bastard," Andrews said.

Henry Deal, the hard-rock man, turned his face toward him. "You have a peculiar notion of the right time to take your exercise, Andrews," he said, flatly.

Gimpler kept his eyes on Kreb. *He's sweating blood now,* he thought.

The gambler riffled his cards, laid them face down. His right hand toyed with his money. Gimpler seemed to be fighting down an expression of eagerness, and it was enough to make up Kreb's mind for him. He shook his head slowly. "All right, Miles," he said finally. "It's your pot."

Turned it! Gimpler thought, but forced disappointment to show in his face. He raked the money in. Andrews reached for Gimpler's cards, but Miles caught his wrist.

"You didn't pay to see these, friend," Gimpler bit out.

The shill drew his arm back and shrugged. Henry Deal shuffled his feet. He stood up. His face was intent, angry. "All right, Andrews, you wanted to walk—now's a good time."

Miller blinked uncertainly from one to the other. Kreb frowned. "All right, Paul," he said. "Go buy yourself a drink."

The shill shrugged again. Little currents eddied the smoky air as he closed the door behind him. Henry Deal took off his heavy jacket, draped it over the back of his chair. "Now I feel better," he declared.

Kreb watched Gimpler stack his winnings. There was eight thousand dollars in gold in front of him. Miles thought: *Now we'll feint a little more—but this time the bastard's alone!*

Luck came to Miles Gimpler from that moment. It rode upon his shoulder and laughed at the other players. In three hours he had won twenty thousand dollars. Beads of sweat glistened on Kreb's pale face. He drank from his whisky glass for the first time.

"Juan—a new pack," he ordered. The Mexican came up grinning.

"*Si, Señor!*" He laid a sealed box of cards on the table. Then he looked at Kreb. Something passed between them —almost invisible. But Gimpler caught it.

Time for the kill, he thought, savagely. He saw the new assurance in Kreb's manner. The man shuffled the pack slowly, methodically, every movement open and direct. He smiled at Miles.

"Maybe cutting them will kill your luck," he said.

"I'm not superstitious," Gimpler returned. He grinned, reached out for the deck of cards. His thick fingers caressed the edges lightly; as he expected, the deck was crimped. Instantly he cut the deck exactly in half, seeming not to have hesitated at all. But at the same moment he sneezed lustily, drew the cards he had cut toward him with his left hand, and used his right hand to pull a kerchief from his breast pocket. He blew his nose and replaced the handkerchief.

"Goddamn cold," he declared. "Been coming on for five days." He placed the cards in his left hand on the table. Kreb stared at them with frowning intentness. *He knows I switched a half a deck,* Miles thought, *Now let him sweat!*

Kreb picked up the deck. The cards Gimpler had substituted lay on the bottom, some twenty cards down. That meant the deck would not be known to the dealer. Kreb began to cook, with the same care, but his air of confidence was shaken.

Henry Deal opened the pot for a hundred dollars. Gimpler anted without looking at his cards. He lighted a cheroot, puffed deeply to get it going and, holding it in his teeth, picked up his hand. He spread it slowly. Four hearts, the seven, nine, ten and jack—and a jack of spades. He closed the cards and thought. Only a fool would draw to an inside straight; it would be what Kreb wouldn't expect.

Miller grunted. His stake was down to a few hundred dollars. He gripped his cards in one vise-like hand. Kreb was watching only Gimpler. The gambler had the choice of trusting that sheer luck wouldn't beat him or of throwing in and waiting for a better chance. Miles Gimpler watched him making up his mind, then Kreb's hand pushed money into the pot.

Deal took two cards. Gimpler frowned and held up one finger. He saw Kreb's eyes widen, then narrow. The dealer laid one card carefully upon the table in front of Miles. Gimpler did not pick it up, but drew it to him and let it lay there.

"Five hundred," Henry Deal said flatly.

Still without looking at his draw card, Gimpler counted out the money. Miller laughed hoarsely and called. It was up to Kreb once more and again he hesitated. Then he met the bet and said: "Up a thousand."

Deal looked sharply at him. "Steep."

"Getting late," Kreb returned. He kept his eyes on Gimpler's face.

Deal called the bet with a shrug. Gimpler smiled lazily. "I think four cards are good enought for that," he said. "See it and one thousand more."

Miller called, sweating hard. Kreb swallowed nervously.

His left hand drummed on the green cloth. "You can't win all night, Miles," he said. "We're grown men. Up five thousand."

He's decided to chance it, Miles thought with a stir of triumph.

Deal looked from one to the other, then closed his hand. "Poison. I had three ladies." He laid them face up.

Kreb's mean eyes fixed to Gimpler. "You wanted action, Miles," he said savagely. "Now you're getting it."

"And I appreciate it," Miles answered, face expressionless. "See you and five thousand more."

Miller threw his cards on the table. "Goddamn it to hell!" he cursed. "I'm out."

"That leaves us, Harry," Miles said. He drew smoke into his lungs, expelled it. There was a raw edge to his nerves that he fought to conceal. Kreb didn't do it as well; his drumming fingers slowed and he swallowed nothing again.

"I haven't got that much cash," he said.

Gimpler smiled his wry smile. "Table stakes would include the table—and the place," he said thoughtfully. "I've got twelve thousand more. I'll push you for the works, Harry." He blew smoke out in a thick gust. "Write a note. It will do. We have two witnesses."

Henry Deal leaned forward a little. The drama of the stark moment held him rooted in place. Even Pete Miller forgot to curse. They watched Harry Kelb making up his mind, slowly, methodically, the way he laid out cards. He was balancing the odds against him, and finally he smiled.

"You'd like to see me back water wouldn't you, Miles?" he asked, "But I won't. Whole hog or none."

He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, scribbled on it with a pencil and handed it to Deal. The hardrock man signed it. He passed it in turn to Miller who signed it and laid it atop the pile of golden coins.

"All right, sucker," Kreb said. "You're bluffing, but there are four gentlemen to back my play.

He laid his cards down face up: four kings and a deuce.

Miles frowned at them. "Now we'll see." He drew his left hand into his lap, used his right to turn his cards over, one at a time. Seven, nine, ten and jack of hearts. He touched the fifth card which he had as yet not seen.

He read the triumph on Kreb's face.

"Drew to an inside straight, by God!" Deal whispered.

Gimpler turned the fifth card over without looking at it. Breath hissed out sharply. But he was watching Harry Kreb's face. It went pale, and his eyes glittered insanely.

"*He made it, by God!*" Miller exclaimed. "The hard way."

Kreb stared down at the eight of hearts that lay upon the table. Then he stood up, breathing hard. His chair went over with a crash. Lines of strain and anger ran down his face. "You dirty, cheating son-of-a-bitch!"

The gambler backed a step. His face worked strangely. His right hand moved across the flatness of his belly, came out with a revolver gripped tightly. Henry Deal jerked crazily back out of the line of fire.

Pete Miller yelled: "*For Christ's sake, look out!*"

The gun in Kreb's fist came around with slow deliberation.

Miles Gimpler sighed heavily. His hidden left hand flexed, a derringer dropped into his thick fingers. He pulled both triggers at the same time. The flatting roar of the shots jarred the thick smoke of the room, sending it eddying in crazy currents.

Harry Kreb still stood there staring. His right hand sagged downward, his revolver as yet unfired. He swayed. Red gushed out, stained his fancy broadcloth waistcoat. Then he fell face forward to the floor and lay there unmoving.

Miles Gimpler thumbed two new shells into his der-

ringer, closed it with a snap and stood up. "The game is closed," he said, softly. "It will be open tonight. No crimped decks, no shills. That is my promise to you."

The Mexican was cowering against one wall. Miles ordered softly: "All right, juan. I'm buying these gentlemen a good-night drink."

CHAPTER NINE

Lou Winters sat on the horsehair-stuffed settee in the lobby of the hotel, her eyes fixed to the dust-grimed window that opened onto the street. The lamps in the lobby spilled individual pools of yellow light on the bare wooden floor, made harsh black lines on the white-painted walls. Cart Tatum came from behind the desk once to grin at her and hand her a much-read newspaper.

"It ain't news, maybe, but it's better than nothing. I've cleared my stuff out of the room and it's ready when you are."

She thanked him and he returned to the desk. She read the paper for awhile, but her mind kept wandering from what she read. From the street came the flatted sound of shots, the drumming of racing hoofs. Her oval face sharpened at the noise. One more wild boomtown—God, how many had she seen? Was there no end to them? Dodge and Hays City, Apache Wells and Denver. . . .

She leaned her head back against the green plush settee and closed her eyes. Booted feet thumped on the floor, and she opened her eyes. A big, bold-featured man was grinning down at her.

"By God, if it isn't Lou!" he said. "Now Thunder Rock can come to life. It's been dead up til now."

She smiled up into his face. "Hello, Duke," she said. "You look good."

"Should because I feel the same way," he returned. "Dog dirty but loaded for bear. First come, first served—

and I was here early, Lou. It paid off for me finally. Made me a real strike."

"Make it quick and get out, Duke," she said. "Your wife and kids miss you."

"Not as much as I miss them." The big prospector sat down beside her. "Where you gain' to be, Lou? I'm me down for the first forty dances."

She shook her head. "I don't know. I'm with Miles Gimpler."

Duke Keley looked sharply at her and pursed his lips. "So?" He asked shrugged. "You've got better sense than any man I ever met, and you know your way around. You know what you're doing.

"Sometimes I wonder, Duke."

"We all do," he returned and smiled gruffly. "But that doesn't make it any more certain to come out right. Right now you look beat—can you use a cup of coffee?" His face twisted ruefully. "Maybe you'd write a line to Martha for me. I ain't written her in a 'coon's age, and she'll be worried."

"I'll be glad to, Duke." Lou Winters got up and they walked into the cafe together. He picked a table close to the window. Out on the street an ore wagon rumbled past.

Keley brought paper and a pencil stub from a pocket of his woolen mackinaw. He laid them awkwardly down in front of her. "There ain't many like you, Lou."

Her smile was self-mocking. "It would be a sad world if there were," she answered.

He shook his head. A waitress came and he ordered coffee. "Just tell Martha I'm doin' fine an' I miss her a whole lot, an' the kids, too. An' tell her—I ain't spendin' another winter here." He looked into Lou Winters' face. "I've done real good this time, Lou."

The woman returned his look and smiled. "I'll tell her that you love her, Duke. That's what a woman wants to hear. It will be true."

"Amen," Duke Keley rejoined. "Amen to that."

She wrote slowly at first, then more quickly, stirred by the things that went unsaid. Duke Keley watched her, and when she had finished, let her read it back to him.

"'I love you, Martha. It's all that has kept me here. What I am doing is for you and the children. It has been hard, being alone out here, but I have done well at last. Things will be better for all of us now. And I am not staying much longer. I will be home before winter sets in. Kiss Lucille and Billy for me. I'll do it myself soon. Your loving husband.'" Lou finished reading what she had written, laid it down before him. He licked the end of the pencil stub, then scrawled his name clumsily. He folded the paper and stuck it into his pocket.

"Thanks, Lou," he said, half-embarressedly. "I'll send it out to Denver by one of the boys, and they'll post it from there. She'll get it within a month."

"You've told her you're coming home," Lou said, frowning out at the noisy street. "Do it, Duke. This is no place for a man with a family."

"Don't worry—I've been out here long enough to know when it's time to cut and run." He laughed. "I'll be telling about Thunder Rock to my grandsons, an' they'll swear to God I'm lyin'." He sobered. "You ever need a favor, Lou—I'm your man."

She hesitated. "There is a man here in Thunder Rock. His name is Hart Caven. He is tall and thin, with heavy shoulders. Find him a claim, Duke. Something to make him stay here."

He pursed his lips again in the silent whistle. "Is it like that, Lou?"

She frowned. "I don't know yet," she replied, softly.

"Then you will have time to find out. Trust Duke. There is a place. I will see that this man finds it—or that it finds him."

Lou Winters drank her coffee, then tired, she excused herself and went to the small room beneath the stairs. She

closed the door behind her and shot the bolt. The room was square, the ceiling slanting low over the single iron bedstead. Clean bedding had been piled on the bed and she made it up. The single lamp was turned low, spilling flickering shadows up the plain clapboard walls. Over the head of the bed something had been scrawled with a pencil:

It ain't like Home—but what is?

Lou undressed, studied her face in the cracked mirror that stood over the wooden chest. The skin was smooth and white. The eyes were slightly tiptilted, and of a peculiar dark green color. She frowned slightly, touched her lips. She remembered the hungry touch of Hart Caven's mouth, the tremble of his hands as he caught her. She forced the thought away, blew out the lamp, and crawled between the covers.

She lay there restlessly. Feet pounded on the stairs over her head. The noises of the town seeped through the thin clapboard walls. Loneliness was a pressing weight upon her, smothering her.

It was very late when there came a sharp rap-rap at the door. She got up, went to the door. "Who's there?"

Miles Gimpler's mild voice said: "Me."

She slipped the bolt back and stood there in the darkness. He came as far as the doorway and halted. He seemed different, the hardness closer to the surface, the veneer of soft good-humor somehow peeled away, leaving something raw and harsh exposed. He was smiling and he was halfway drunk.

"Don't worry," he said. "I remember our deal. I'm not coming in. I just wanted to tell you we're in business. You'll see it tomorrow. Fanciest layout in town. You'll walk into it like a queen. You'll own this town in a year." He blinked at her and his face sobered. "The credit is all yours. I never had the guts to push it before.

I did tonight. You did that. I had to kill a man to do it, but I did it, Lou."

He was drunker than she had thought, for he wavered a little. His face went hard and sober suddenly. "You do this to a man, Lou."

He came in suddenly, pulled her to him. For an instant he held her tightly, staring down into her eyes, then as suddenly he released her. He backed through the door. His wry smile was back in place as he closed the door behind him. His feet thumped away, moving uncertainly, although he was not that drunk.

Lou Winters stood very still, feeling the bite of his hands on her bare arms. She shuddered once, then shot the bolt on the door and returned to her bed. Wide-eyed, she stared into the darkness of the room.

CHAPTER TEN

SUNLIGHT BURNING through a crack in the warped clapboard walls of the stable touched Hart Caven's face as he stirred slowly to wakefulness. For a moment he was struck with a vague sense of disorientation, and he stared at the weather-grayed boards without recognition. Then memory stirred and he lay back, closing his eyes once more. The town of Thunder Rock, never fully asleep, had come to life, and the noises were a steady humming sound in Caven's head. *One more day*, he thought; one more in the endless procession that seemed without beginning, almost without purpose. Then he remembered Davey and thought of Dolman and Thaddus and his mouth drew tight.

The time had come to make another decision, to stay or to move on. But he pushed it away and stood up. Hunger gnawed inside him. First things first he decided. He had yet to see Nevada Gulch by daylight, and the only way out lay back the way he had come. Colorado Ter-

ritory was a gigantic area, dotted with a hundred goldfields. And any one of them could hold the men he sought. He frowned as he brushed straw from his clothes. He ran his fingers through his unruly mop of chestnut-colored hair, then made his way to the front of the stable. He stepped over two sleeping men, saw others asprawl in the straw. The sound of their snores followed him into the sunlight. It had cost him fifty cents to bed down here, and as the sharp-eyed hostler had informed him, he was damned lucky to get that.

The sun was already a brassy glare in the cloudless sky, and a pall of yellow miasma hung over the gulch as Hart stepped from the alleyway into Walker Street. The street itself was alive with moving men, with crawling wagons driven by cursing, sweating drivers. Word of the lucky strikes in Nevada Gulch had gone out with telling effect; in the few hours that he had been in Thunder Rock, Hart was aware of a change, of a surging growth. New tents dotted the steep sides of the gulch like gray rectangular mushrooms, and the pounding of hammers on new construction was a steady din.

A muleskinner drove a team of roach-backed animals up the street, dragging a sledge heavily loaded with green lumber for siding, and three men ran abreast the driver, bidding for the wood. A Butterfield stage fresh from Denver swayed up the street to churn to a halt in front of the Neely House. Painted-faced women filled the body of the coach, their eyes bright and shining as they exchanged banter with grinning miners.

It was a raw, emotion-rousing scene—this harsh growth of a boomtown—and it held a certain fascination for Hart Caven. In a week Thunder Rock would double in size; in a month it would rival the Territorial capitol. And from what Hart had gathered during his rounds the night before, Thunder Rock would be no flash in the pan, but a genuine strike to rival those of California Gulch and Gold Hill.

Hart watched the flood of fortune-seeking humanity for long minutes before he moved on. Across Walker Street a new eating place had opened, a crudely lettered sign proclaiming: *The Best Damned Meals In The Territory For $1.* The canvas-topped structure had no front, and Hart stood in line to wait his turn to sit at one of the three long benches that faced a plank counter. In his turn he was served a thin, tough steak, fried potatoes and black coffee. He ate in an unhurried manner, drank his coffee, paid his dollar, and returned to the street.

He spent more time watching the steady flow of traffic up the gulch, his eyes seeking out each man's face briefly before going on to the next. The same old doubt plagued him: Would he know Dolman and Thaddus if he found them? He shook it away, and then still disturbed, started his walk down Walker Street. He moved steadily, without purpose, and presently reached the end of the new town. Here below the town the sides of the gulch were more sparsely dotted with miner's tents and the raw yellow slashes that marked the tailings of their exploratory shafts.

Where Walker Street and Thunder Rock town proper began, some optimistic natural-born press-agent had erected a wide plank sign with this inscription:

THE RICHEST SQUARE MILE ON THE FACE
OF THE EARTH

It was part and parcel of the growing legend that was bringing thousands of men West to the new territories, another facet of the same excitement that had led enterprising miners to salt a mine-facing with gold, fired from a shotgun, in order that Horace Greeley might see for himself that gold lay ready to hand for the taking.

Lies and truth, exaggeration and understatement, miserable failure and fortunate discovery that made men rich overnight—it was all a part of this exciting thing that was Colorado in 1866. The lure of it was strong upon Hart Caven, and he found himself eyeing the gulch spec-

relatively before he grinned to himself and turned to retrace his steps.

As he walked, wagons and freighters rumbled past him, and he lost himself in thought, only to be rudely jarred into awareness as he was struck with force enough to knock him sprawling to the dust at the side of the road. He shook his head and looked up to see two mounted men staring down at him. The man who had walked his horse into Hart grinned through a tobacco-stained beard.

"You learn hard, clodhopper," he said. Hart knew him at once; the bandit that Lou Winters had identified as "Curly." The man's wide grin held for a moment, but his eyes were vicious. "Stay out of my way."

The man behind Curly was slight of build, narrow of face. He was clean-shaven, an oddity in this land of bearded men, and his skin was pasty white. He was laughing in silent enjoyment of Hart's discomfiture as they rode on up the street.

Hart got up and carefully dusted himself off. His eyes followed the two men as they rode into Thunder Rock and narrowed as he saw them pull up in front of a saloon and dismount. Hart's mouth settled in a thin smile and he returned to the road and walked slowly on. The two horses were tethered to the tierail in front of the Long Tom Saloon, and he paused before it. He held there a moment, his face hard and intent, and then he turned in.

The big room sweltered under the heat of the sun pouring through dingy gray canvas, and despite the fact the side walls were rolled up, no breath of air fanned the greasy tobacco smoke that held in a turbulent pall overhead. Men were lined up at the bar three deep—but Hart's intent gaze caught Curly and his partner, an open space to either side of them. Hart started for them, then halted as a big, rawboned man stepped in front of him. The man's bluff, open face was smiling.

"They're poison, mister," he said, softly. His eyes flickered toward Curly and his companion, and then he moved

on, as if he had not paused at all. Hart held still a moment longer, then walked to the bar to stand beside Curly.

The bandit was a big man; his shoulders were wide and thick, and his heavily corded neck stood up redly above the open collar of his flannel shirt. A thin rime of dirt stood around the fringes of his beard, across the redness of his neck. His right hand lay across the bar, gripping a glass of whisky. The bone handles of his Navy Colt were thrust up and slightly forward.

As Curly lifted the glass to his lips, Hart drove his elbow in the bandit's ribs. Curly's arm jolted and the whisky spilled down his chin, seeping into his tangled beard. He cursed and started his turn, his right hand dropping the whisky glass to the bar.

"You're too slow, Curly," Hart said. The knife in his hand whispered through the leather of the gunbelt that sagged about and below Curly's belly bulge. The Navy Colt dropped to the floor.

Men to either side of them stepped hurriedly away, leaving a clear space before the plank bar.

Curly's right hand clawed at his waist where his revolver had been and his face contorted. "You son-of-a bitch!" he yelled.

Hart stepped back a pace. "You reach down for that barker and I'll gut you," he said, flatly. "I don't like being crowded, Curly."

The bandit stared at the glistening length of steel upright in Hart's fist, then licked his mouth. Fear laid heavily across him. Fear of the knife, fear of the man who held it.

"Step out away from the bar," Hart ordered. "*Now!*" He barked the last word and gestured with the knife. The bandid almost jumped into the room. His eyes shot frantically to his smaller companion. The pasty-faced man carried no gun; his thin face was impassive until he laughed.

"He wants to fight you, Curly," he said. "Oblige him."

The big man blinked uncertainly at Hart, at the knife he held in his right hand. The urge to violence inside Hart was a singing tension that must be released. His right hand jerked and the heavy bladed knife *thunked* into the bar to quiver there. Instantly Curly's right hand lashed out, balled into a fist. It struck home savagely and Hart's head bounced back.

The force of the blow shook him, drove blackness in front of his eyes, and for an instant the sickening feeling of falling gripped him. He threw it off, met the outlaw's forward plunge with a solid hook. It was like striking the side of a brick building, and had as little effect.

"Sucker," Curly panted, driving in. "Never give another man a break."

His fists drove against Hart's lean body, forcing him back. Hart blocked some of the blows with his forearms, but those that broke through his guard left their mark. Curly smashed in blows that jarred and hurt and Hart's feet slipped beneath that charging might. He went down to one knee, and instantly the outlaw jumped back, let drive with one booted foot. The blow was intended to break his ribs and would have done precisely that if squarely landed, but Hart rolled downward, caught the heel of Curly's boot, surged back, and spilled the heavier man to the floor. They rolled and came up together like fighting cats.

Hart was breathing hard, sucking in air in gusts, a trickle of blood spilling from his nose. He went back with Curly's head-lowered charge, throwing his fists in short, chopping blows. Curly's head rocked to the force of them, but his legs drove him on. He landed a hard swung right to the side of Hart's head, and the smaller man jerked back from the force of it. His hips struck a table and he fell from it to one side to be met with a short, hammered blow that dropped him to the floor.

He saw Curly's triumphant grin as the big man came stomping in, and he saw something more: Curly's small

surprised and hurt, his hand reaching for the gun that Hart had cut from Curly's waist. Then he saw the big, rawboned man who had warned him moving faster, setting his foot atop the still-holstered weapon. Hart had time for no more. He ruled desperately, avoided Curly's kicking feet, smashed into a chair, caught it with his hands and brought it in front of him as Curly surged forward. Hart jabbed the legs of the chair into the bigger man's face. Blood spurted from a cut across Curly's forehead and the big man reeled dizzily.

It gave Hart time to gain his feet. He balanced there awaiting Curly's charge. It came suddenly, the outlaw flailing his fists wildly, trying to smash his smaller opponent to the floor. Hart measured his swing, drove in his left hand. He felt the shock of it striking clear to his shoulder, and his own blow coupled with Curly's forward rush turned the trick. The big man's eyes glazed and his legs wobbled uncertainly. Instantly Hart came in for the kill. He threw his left, crossed his right—hard, savage blows that connected with fiercely audible thuds.

Curly's forward plunge was stopped, and he was smashed to the floor. He lay there face down, his body quivering and jerking as he fought to bring himself back erect. Hart wiped the blood from his face with one trembling hand. He faced the outlaw's smaller companion.

"Get him out of here before I kill him!" Hart panted. The little man stared at him, then down at the fallen giant, and came forward uncertainly.

Curly pushed himself up to a sitting position, shaking his head. The other man bent, helped him to his feet. Staggering under the bigger man's weight, he led the way out the open-faced saloon to the boardwalk.

Hart returned to the bar. Men were grinning and talking about the fight. One of them shook Hart's hand. The big rawboned man pushed a schooner of beer in front of him.

"Thanks," Hart said. "Thanks three times—the last time for the beer."

The man grinned and thrust a paw of a hand out. "It took a man to take Curly Grieve's measure. But it isn't Curly you'll want to watch. Jerry Gruber walks in front of him to show the way."

"Then I'll make that thanks four times," Hart said. He drank the beer in thirsty gulps. "Hart Craven's my name."

"Mine's Kelcy—call me Duke." The man's face was bleak-eyed, and the skin was roughed by exposure to the weather to a sort of rock redness. His hand was rough and hard. "You out here lookin' for luck the same as the rest of us?"

Hart frowned. "You could say that."

"Then maybe I can do you a turn. The stampede's on, and they move in fast—too fast to bother to look close. There's a gulch claim off from my own. It's yours for the taking."

Hart set his schooner of beer down and faced the tall man squarely. His voice held the same flat hardness. "Why?"

Kelcy shrugged, but met his eyes evenly, still smiling. "Maybe I like the cut of your jib, maybe I like the way you took down Curly Grieve—but I'm not beggin' you to take it." There was undeniable honesty in the man's voice and in his eyes, and Hart felt the force of it.

For a moment he held there, then sipped again at his beer. His eyes focused on the grimy canvas behind the bar. The violence of the fight with Curly had burned away his restlessness, leaving behind it a tiredness that struck clear to the bones of his body. Lord, how long had he been driven by the memory of Davey's dying face, how many men had he stared after with the killing hate in his eyes, trying to clear away the haziness of memory to find Dolman and Thaddus? Many men and many months, each taking something from him that would never return. Perhaps it was time to call a halt, to put Davey from his mind forever, to make what he could of the years left to him . . .

The thought came strongly, and it was a welcome easement of the pressures of hate he had held for so long. He turned his head to meet the level gaze of Duke Kelcy. The hard-rock man was waiting patiently.

"You have your reasons for what you're doing," Hart said, quietly. "I won't question them now. I'll stake that gulch claim. There will be time for thank yous later."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Duke Kelcy led the way out of Thunder Rock two hours later, Hart Caven at his side. They followed the deeply rutted road that wended its way beside the creek past hundreds of miners busily panning dirt at the creek or working their Long Tom rockers. One group had pooled their claims and built a long, slanting sluice box with shuffle pans inset and were working their dirt systematically. More than one of the men they passed hailed Duke Kelcy by name. He returned their greetings with a grin and a wave of his hand.

"The creek's staked clear to Heaven," Duke said. "Maybe the damned fools feel water's more important than gold. Work harder and earn more, that's my feeling." He chewed methodically on a cud of tobacco and paused to squirt a brown stream of juice into the road. "Me, I'd rather tote my pans of dirt to the creek, wash her out, make sure of color—then figger out a way to bring water into the claim. You'll do best to do the same. If it's worth your while, we'll run a flume down and both use it."

Hart nodded and kept his eyes busy. Without being aware of it, he studied the face of every man they passed. If Duke noticed this habit, he was careful not to mention it.

The road swung across a ford to the far side of the creek, but Duke Kelcy left it there and struck off along a rocky path that edged the creek and the sharp wall of the gulch where it narrowed. It widened a quarter-mile further on to a sandy slope almost like a beach. Two or three gray tents dotted the area, and the path led on past them up the canyon. Across the widened, rippling creek-bed, Hart saw the road graded out of the soft clay shoulder of the gulch.

"Runs on up to Heaven," Kelcy said. "Everybody's in

such a toufool hurry to find gold layin' around on the ground they ain't got time to look for color. I've panned more in a day from dirt they've walked over than most of 'em will ever see." He spat to the ground. "That test's mine. The draw's a couple of hundred yards behind my claim. You can see it where them burned alders are standin'."

There was a dark opening in the canyon wall where Kelcy pointed, and Hart's eyes narrowed. Brush clogged the opening, but Kelcy upon reaching the spot, pushed through, and Hart followed. The small canyon ran some two hundred yards back, sloping sharply upward. Hart thought, quickly: *A man up there with a rifle would command the whole gulch.* It was a mark of the hardness of his way of life that he observed such things first.

"We're in White Water District," Kelcy said. "We got a President, a judge an' a recorder. We had a sheriff but Curly Grieve chased his tail off an' nobody else has applied for the job. Me, I'm President." Kelcy grinned and winked. "You got to abide by some rules out here, an' we got 'em. You can hold one creek, one gulch an' one mountain claim; but you got to work 'em within ten days from the time you stake 'em. Lode claims run a hundred feet in length, fifty feet wide; placer diggin's an area a hundred feet square; an' gulch claims a hundred feet in length, runnin' from bank to bank. That's you. You can go up a foot over the top of the gulch on each side. You can establish the boundaries of your claim with rock piles, file with the Recorder—then get busy an' dig yourself a fortune."

"But first I've got to find the color," Hart said, thoughtfully.

"You will, son, you will," Kelcy returned. "It takes time. Me, I'm quittin' in another two-three months. I'll be home before winter."

"I wish you luck, Duke," Hart said.

"I'll need it," the bigger man agreed. He blinked then spat again. "One thing. Keep 'em close to your vest. Never let another man know what you got in your poke. I always

say, work like hell, sack your gold, an' get out alive to spend it."

Later Hart watched Kelley go back the way they had come. The big miner stepped through the brush that clogged the canyon mouth and was gone. Hart turned around and stared at the yellow-gray walls of the draw. He had made a decision, but it held no real satisfaction for him. His mouth twisted wryly, and he thought: *What do I expect, a fanfare of trumpets because I've decided to use some of the sense God gave me?* He shook his head and moved up the draw.

He would need supplies, a good tarp for a tent-top, tools to work his claim with. But first things first. He paced off one hundred feet up the draw and built a small pile of rocks. Using the marker as a sight he climbed the steep bank to the top, built a second low cairn. He took time to scribble his name, location and date on a scrap of paper and place it amid the rocks of the pile. He crossed the draw to the other side and repeated the process. He was sweating when he regained the floor of the tiny valley, but he felt better. There was a mark of accomplishment behind him, like visible taproots linking him to one spot of earth for the first time in years. It was a good feeling, and to his surprise he found himself whistling as he built the final corner markers of his claim.

Long shadows filled the draw when at last he finished and straightened up. His back was stiff, and he had pulled a muscle in his fight with Curly Grieve. But the feeling of well-being did not desert him. He considered the small canyon objectively, eyes narrowed. There at the head of it he would have to build his brush-walled shelter, and there to the left of the mouth of it he would sink his first test holes.

It was full dusk when he returned to Thunder Rock. The town was coming alive riotously, violently alive—and the streets were thronged with men. Hart passed a hundred on his way down the canyon, and had to stand in line to file his claim with the camp recorder. That done he went to

the open-air food restaurant and ate his supper. He passed the Honest Dealer Saloon, saw the skeleton framework of the upper story had been covered with raw green siding, and the sign was being taken down. A new, white-painted sign lay ready to hand to go up. The Fano Quinn, the letters read, and beside the sign, head tilted back, thumbs hooked into his vest pockets, stood Miles Gimpler. He saw Hart and grinned.

"I wondered what became of you," Gimpler greeted him.

"Staked a claim," Hart answered, and saw Gimpler's eyebrows move quizzically. A workman came down a ladder carrying the old sign. He tossed it into the street, bent to carry the new board up.

"Time moves us all, friend Caven," Gimpler said. He waved one heavy hand. "I shouldn't be surprised since I've done the same thing in a different way."

Hart considered the thronged inside of the saloon and smiled slowly. "You'll be rich before I am, Miles."

Gimpler lowered his gaze to Hart's. "Not necessarily, friend Caven," he said, quietly. "My offer to you still stands. Between us we could—"

"Maybe you're right," Hart cut in. "But let's leave it this way for now."

The heavier man shrugged. "It's your life." He grinned. "But it might interest you to know it would be a three-way thing now. I have a partner, Lou Winters. She asked if I'd seen you."

Hart looked again at the saloon, the crowded length of the bar, the workmen busily hammering on the upper half of the structure. "Then she will have what she wants," he said.

"Isn't that what we're all after?" There was a new hardness behind the blandly smiling face of Miles Gimpler. "What will make you bend to pick it up, friend?"

Hart frowned. "If I knew, maybe you wouldn't have to ask," he returned, and walked on, aware of Gimpler's stare following him.

He turned into Miller's Mercantile Emporium, a sun-grayed frame structure, false-fronted and with the mark of a successful business, sheets of clear window glass across the front. The inside of the store was a conglomerate display of goods, stacked and piled everywhere. Every bit of it had been hauled in from Denver where it in turn had been hauled from railhead at Cheyenne. Hart purchased a pick, shovel, axe, a wide pan to wash his dirt. A lantern and a gallon of coal oil cost him five dollars. A week's supply of food finished his order and the total ran close to a hundred dollars.

He paid the bill in gold and said: "I'll be back for the stuff later."

The clerk nodded. "We close when business stops comin' in. That'll be after midnight, most likely."

The length of Walker Street was choked with men and vechicles. A steady stream of men was pouring into the gulch from the other fields of Colorado Territory. Ox-teams and freighters' wagons moved continuously hauling supplies. Loaded ore wagons rumbled past down-grade, cursing drivers heeling brake rods viciously. Goods were stacked in the street in front of uncompleted buildings. Tar barrels flamed and kerosene flares were lighted to keep the workmen at their job of creating a wooden city from nothing. Mule teams surged slowly up the street drawing timber sleds that ran on steel runners instead of wheels.

A fight broke out in front of the saloon, was dispelled into angrily cursing men as a small string of cattle, driven up and over the hills from a distant grange, stampeded through the street. A man ran out from a building to hail the driver, a red-faced, sweating man atop a tall horse.

"Forty a head for the string!" the man yelled back. "I'll double that in Heaven."

He rode on, and the sweating man ran beside him trying his bid. The traffic closed in behind them cutting them from view.

Hart waited his chance and crossed the street. He passed

a man hunkered down, back against a plank-faced saloon, singing softly to himself.

When the Big Crowds is passing,
And starry skies are bright,
She walks along the river,
In the quiet summer night.

Hart paused and turned back. The singer sat with his head down, staring at the section of boardwalk that ran in front of the building.

She's the sweetest rose of color
This darkey ever knew,
Her eyes are bright as diamonds,
They sparkle like the dew.
You may talk about your dearest May,
And sing of Rosalee,
But the Yellow Rose of Texas
Beats the Belles of Tennessee.

The singer finished the chorus and looked up, grinning ruefully.

"Hello, Bill," Hart said. "You sound sad."

"I am a chastened man," the erstwhile driver of the Butterfield stage returned. "Ambition is a terrible thing in a man. You are regarding its sorrowful aftermath." Bill Wadden straightened, came up on trembling legs. His eyes were shadowed, his face drawn. There was an ugly red-blue bruise alongside his head. "But a man learns. That is something. I had me a stake, and I figured this is the strike where I'll make mine. What happened? Like always, I got damned good and drunk and got rolled. I ain't got a quarter to buy a drink to wash the dust out of my throat. Tomorrow I'll go crawlin' back, beggin' to drive the stage back to Denver. Then I'll build me another stake by starvin' and workin' my

heart out, and then I'll get real flush again—and do the same damned thing all over again, most like."

Hart smiled. "I'm buying," he said. "I know no one in camp."

"You're white," Wadden said. "If these damned legs will carry me. I'm your man."

They moved together down the boardwalk. They crossed the street to the new Faro Queen Saloon. Kerosene flares lighted the whole front of it. From inside came the tinny whanging of a piano then the low-toned voice of a woman singing. They pushed through the first set of swinging doors they came to and the smell of fresh paint mingled with the raw stench of whisky and the sour aroma of beer smote them fully. Blue smoke curled close to the low ceiling, and men stood four deep at the tremendous length of the bar.

A small stage—no more that heavy planks nailed to cross-trees—was outlined in the glare of a dozen polished brass-reflectored lamps that stood along the front of it. In the flood of white light stood a woman in a spangled dress that caught the bright light, shattered it and flung it in tiny spears about the dingy room. The men in the place had been caught by the song she sang, and there was almost a hushed air to the saloon. It was the bittersweet melody of *The Bonnie Blue Flag*. It stirred old memories, sad, sweet memories in Hart—and in the rest of the men present. One bearded man wearing the tattered remnants of what had been a gray uniform coat was crying silently, tears rolling down his seamed face.

Bill Wadden sniffed audibly, then cursed. "I'm a damned sentimental fool," he said. "I've heard Lou sing that song a hundred times and it always hits me hard."

Hart watched the pale oval of the woman's face. Her eyes were closed as she sang. She finished the song and silence held tautly for an instant to be broken finally by thunderous applause. Lou Winters opened her eyes and smiled.

A man close to the stage called out: "To hell with them

Johnny Reb songs—let's hear "Jeanie With The Light Brown Hair'!"

He was instantly shouted down, and other men yelled out their favorites. The girl on the stage shook her head still smiling. "I'll sing them all for you but give a girl a chance to catch her breath. I'll be right back."

Bill Wadden elbowed his place through the crowd to the bar and shoved to make room for Hart. He grinned. "If I had four-bits, I'd lay it even money Lou don't get run out of this town. She'll fill her poke and when she leaves, it'll be in style like the lady she really is."

"I hope you're right," Hart said softly. He looked back at the stage but it was now empty. The piano-player was banging out some discordant harmony. The bartender finally got around to them, set up a bottle and two glasses. Wadden's hand trembled as he filled them.

"Here's to the way things used to be," he said. He grimaced as he emptied his glass at a single gulp. He refilled the glass. Hart's sat untouched. "If that won't suit you, then here's to the way we'd like things to be."

Hart drank the fiery liquor. The man beside him said: "Hi, Lou—buy you a drink?"

Lou Winters shook her head. She was looking at Hart. Her face was serious, her clear eyes veiled. She asked: "I hope you've found what you were looking for."

Hart nodded, slowly. "I've staked my ground. I'm staying here in the gulch. For awhile."

Surprised glistened momentarily in her eyes then was gone. She shrugged. "Then I'll see you again." There was a question in her glance. It held him and he nodded.

"I'll be around," he said.

She gave him one long look, then her smile flickered on her face and she turned away. Hart set his empty glass on the bar. Bill Wadden was grinning at him.

"Never seen Lou taken with a man before," he said. "Hard as nails, brittle as glass. That's Lou to the rest of us. To

you she's something different." He broke off and hummed a strain of "The Yellow Rose of Texas."

Hart dug five silver dollars from his pocket, laid them on the bar. "A meal would do you better than more whisky," he said. He turned around and left the saloon. He returned to Miller's Mercantile Emporium, got his roll of supplies, then set out up canyon for his claim.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Toby Bell stood at the plank bar of the Golden Nugget Saloon and opened his leather poke to pinch golden dust to pay for his drink. The rotgut whisky was a warm rebellion stirring inside him and he felt content with himself and with the world. He was aware of the slight man who stood down the bar from him staring at him from glittering eyes. It made a thin coldness down Toby's spine, but it was what had brought him here, and he turned away from the bar to walk unsteadily to the entrance.

On the street he paused. The fresh air cleared his head, but he put a stagger in his walk as he made his way down the still busy street. He paused once to lean his shoulder against a building and to struggle awkwardly to light his cigar. He cursed drunkenly as the flame went out. But his sharp eyes had caught the slightly built man coming up behind him, followed by a bigger, heavier shadow. Toby grinned, got the cigar drawing finally and moved on.

He breasted a dark alleyway, seemed to stagger, missed the corner of the building and reeled into the darkness. He heard a man's hissing voice: "After him, Curly!"

Toby flattened himself against the rear wall, the assumed air of drunkenness gone, his right hand dipping down and up. His heavy Navy Colt lay in his hand. His teeth opened and he spat out the cigar and stepped on it as a big man came into the alley at a shambling run. The man drew up

with a hissing intake of breath as Toby's revolver jabbed viciously into his bulging belly.

"Tell your friend to join us, Curly," Toby whispered, coldly. "Your first mistake will be the last you'll ever make."

Curly Grieve's stricken face stared into Toby Bell's set features. Toby's gun prodded sharply into him, and Curly said hurriedly: "Come here, Jerry."

The slight man came into the alley. His caustic voice demanded: "What is it, you damned fool? Can't you roll a drunk without—" The words broke off as Toby Bell's big left hand clamped on the back of his neck jerked him to his knees.

"You stinkin' two-bit pilgrims!" Toby Bell said, sourly. "I thought that poke would bring you runnin'. You owe me two hundred iron men you took when you held up the stage. I should take it in blood."

"That gun makes you big," Curly Grieve growled.

"You're damned right it does!" Toby agreed. He stepped in close and slammed the barrel down across Curly's head, driving the huge man to his knees. "You don't know how big yet, but you're goin' to find out." He chuckled to himself.

Jerry Gruber was a thin shadow, bowed inward under the threat of the gun. "All right," he said. "So we made a mistake."

"You damned well did, brother," Toby agreed dryly. "And one you're goin' to regret for a long time if I don't get my two hundred back."

Jerry Gruber nodded, then aware the movement of his head went unnoticed in the darkness said hurriedly: "All right, you'll get it. I know you now. Toby Bell. I'm Jerry Gruber. Abilene, six years ago. You'll remember me."

"So I remember you. So what?" Toby demanded. "It changes nothing."

"Doesn't it?" Gruber straightened slowly, more sure of himself. "At least you'll know I mean what I say when I

tell you this is a narrow fence. Only so many cats can walk on it."

"I'm the biggest tom you ever saw," Toby returned, sharply.

"It isn't done that way here," Jerry Gruber said flatly. "Curly and I found that out the hard way. You will, too, unless you're smart. And I think you're smart enough to learn fast when you have to."

"What is there to make me think I have to?" Toby demanded harshly.

Curly Grieve groaned and lurched back to his feet, one hand out to the building wall to hold himself erect.

"It's all right, Curly," Jerry Gruber said. "Your head is hard."

"It ain't iron, by God!" the big bandit barked. He kept his eyes on Toby Bell. "Look, Bell, you play it right and you'll get rich. But if you try to buck the outfit we're with you're dead. That's the way it is. We're not alone in this."

"Right this minute you are as lonely as the wind." Toby returned, grimly. "And winds have a way of dyin' sudden-like. I'm getting tired of playing games with you. This is the last time I'll ask for my two hundred bucks."

"Then you are crazy," Jerry Gruber said calmly. His voice dropped. "I've got your two hundred. It's chicken-feed. Take what I've got on me—it's better that two thousand in gold. Go ahead, take it. Walk alone. See how long you'll last."

"I'll do all right," Toby returned, but there was doubt in his voice. "You keep talkin' around it—now get it said. I've got time to listen."

Jerry Gruber relaxed visibly. "All right. We stop playing games. Curly, you leave him alone. Forget it. Toby, this is it. This is what you've been waiting for—a setup like you've never seen in your life. No risk. Play it as hard as you please—still no risk. You get fat and rich. But only if you play it our way. Now put that gun away."

Toby Bell hesitated, then grinned. The Navy Colt slid into the holster. "You're buyin'," he said. "Make mine money. Any color."

"Even blood red?" Jerry cackled laughter. "We'll see. All right but not here. There is a better place and there'll be someone there at midnight you'll want to meet. Right now, I can use a drink."

Again Bell hesitated, then he laughed. "What the hell have I got to lose? You cross me, either one of you, and you're dead."

They left the alley together, distrust stiffening Bell and Grieve but leaving Gruber unaffected. They returned to the Golden Nugget and had their drink. Gruber made conversation for awhile, but Bell's taut, waiting silence finally shut him up. They refilled their glasses more than once as time passed. Curly Grieve stirred impatiently.

"I don't like this, Jerry," he complained.

"But you will learn to like it," the slight man returned flatly. He looked at his watch. "It's nearly midnight. Let's get out of here."

He led the way back to the street. Traffic still surged up and down the canyon without letup. Jerry Gruber's eyes glistened as he watched it, but he walked in silence. He didn't pause where Walker Street ended but followed the road down canyon a quarter of a mile, then turned along a rutted trail to the right. Yellow light glistened through the hide-covered windows of a miner's shack set at the base of the white slide area that angled sharply up the canyon. Alders stood in a screen before the shack partially masking it from the road. From the rear came the whinny of a horse.

"Hell, he's already here," Curly said. "He'll eat us out good, Jerry."

"Stand up and stay that way," the little man ordered bluntly. "I'll do the talking." He swiveled his sharp-faced head toward Bell. "You'll do well to listen, too."

Gruber tapped on the door in a deliberate tattoo. The

door opened a crack and a man peered out. "Me," Gruber said. "Three of us together."

The door swung wide spilling yellow lamplight out into the night. The man who had opened the door stepped away. "The boss here, Ron?" Gruber asked.

The man shut the door behind them. "He'll be out in a minute. You're the last."

Toby Bell blinked uncertainly in the light of the room. Two lanterns burned overhead, their green shades sending shadows along the wall as they stirred at the end of chains that dangled from naked beams overhead. The small room seemed crowded with men, but Toby Bell guessed there were not more than a dozen all told. They were smoking and talking in low voices. The man named Ron crossed the room and went out the back door. His voice reached them clearly.

"They're all here, Boss."

Feet thumped. Despite his iron nerve, Toby Bell felt ill at ease. The back door opened, and out of the night came a man. Toby Bell blinked rapidly in surprise. Marshall John Cabe of Denver came into the room and the talking ceased. His colorless eyes went around the room seeking out each man. They paused on Toby's face, and the long yellow mustaches across the granite face of John Cabe stirred as he smiled.

"Hello, Toby," he said in his toneless voice. "I expected you, sooner or later. You made it sooner and that's good. But you're not the tall man here. You'll take orders. My orders."

Toby swallowed uncertainly but didn't trust his voice to speak. He nodded and John Cabe's strange eyes moved on, restlessly. They never steadied, Toby thought, like wisps of smoke in a face of rock, shifting, changing, menacing. And the flat-toned voice, a rasping sound in the stillness of the room. This man was sure of himself as few men are—sure of his strength, his will, his purpose.

"Most of you worked with me in Denver," he said. "Some

of you knew me in Apache Wells. You know I mean what I say. I offer you protection. Not a man of you will hang for what you do here. And Nevada Gulch will be the biggest thing any of us have ever seen."

Cabe paused. He took a dark cheroot from his vest, bit the tip off, lighted it. "There is one thing wrong with being dishonest—you can get caught at it. And out here a miner's court won't fool with you. The nearest cottonwood tree will do, and you'd every one of you make prime fruit for it. I am guaranteeing you that will not happen. *If you do as I say.* It will take time and there must be organization; but we have both. At least one of you—I mean you, Toby—has never participated in a joint effort of this type. But you will learn."

Blue smoke curled up in front of the expressionless face and the eyes of the marshal of Denver blended with the color of it. "It is my purpose to grow rich. I'm not fussy how I do it. You will all help me—and yourselves at the same time. Every strike, every heavy poke in these camps will feel our might. You will drift everywhere, be a part of everything. You will keep your mouths shut and your eyes open. If there is trouble, I will handle it. I will give my orders to Ron and he will pass the word to each of you. Don't hang around together, stay apart and don't fight among yourselves. I won't take sides." His eyes made the rounds again, unblinking, as cold as snow. "For the time being I will remain in Denver. The Territorial Commision is forming counties and will appoint sheriffs for each. I have been called upon—Whitewater District will be mine. I will run it as I choose. There will be no outside influences and no independent operations. You will remember that. I'll kill the first man that forgets it. If you cross me, you'll wish to God the miner's court *had* hung you. Now that's all for tonight. You will leave at five minute intervals. Jerry, I want you and Bell to stay."

The men in the room moved. Two of them left. No introductions were made, but Toby was aware of the fact

that his face had been memorized by every man in the room. Cabe's acceptance of him was enough for them. Two by two they left until just the five of them remained. Cabe said: "Then go out and see to my horse. I'll be leaving in a minute."

Ron left the room. Curly Grieve stirred restlessly. Cabe studied him from narrowed eyes. Then the marshal moved, his right fist lashing out, smashing against Curly's head. The blow shook the big man, and he reeled under the force of it but made no effort to strike back. Fear lay as heavily upon him as a cloak. Cabe's face was coldly expressionless.

"That's for losing the fight with Hart Caven," he said. "I wish to God he'd gutted you. I've told you before I'll stand for no opposition." He smiled coldly. "It might give the rest of the miners ideas."

Jerry Gruber shook his head. "Curly didn't know. Caven jumped him fast. That is one hardnut *hombre* and no mistake. But I'll see that it doesn't happen again. I'll take care of Caven."

"All right," Cabe said. Something seemed to hold him, but he dropped it there and turned to face Toby. "You're welcome here with us. You'll abide by the rules the same as the rest—or you'll regret it. Take your orders with Gruber. Carry them out. We can't afford to be soft. A dead man makes no trouble and the rest will remember. That's all. Goodnight."

The tall, arrogant lawman turned and crossed the room with quick strides. The door closed behind him. Moments later hoofs pounded away into the night. The back door opened again and the man called Ron came in.

"Short an' sweet," Toby said. He grinned. "That's all right with me. I think it will work out fine—but right now I got to find a place to stay."

Jerry Gruber was watching the sullen-faced Curly. The big bandit was rubbing his cheek where Cabe's hard hand had struck. "God damn him!" he said.

"Keep saying that, Curly," Jerry returned, sharply, "and

you're dead. Now shut up. Bell will stay with us. You leave him alone, Curly. You hear me?"

The angry man glared at Toby. "To hell with him," Curly bit out. "And to hell with you, too, Jerry!" He turned and slammed out of the shack.

Gruber smiled, his pinched-in face splitting oddly. "He'll get drunk and then he'll behave. He's not used to taking a licking. But he'll get over it."

Toby Bell grinned. "I don't give a good damn if he does or don't." His eyes met Gruber's, held them. "I've heard a lot of talk. It sounds good. But not as good as the clink of gold. You still owe me two hundred bucks."

Gruber shook his head. "Forget it. I've done you a favor worth ten times what Curly took. You'll get it back on the first job you pull, and some more to keep it company. Now let's get out of here."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HART CAVEN used his axe to fell trees along the ridge of the draw. He rolled the trimmed logs down to form the walls of his shack and cut brush for siding, interlacing it thickly, and using his tarp for a roof. He spent three hours making the framework of a bunk, using the long grass of the small valley for a mattress over the thin pole bottom slats. He was working when the sun came up, and still working when it set. He finished his pole-faced door by lantern light, and hung it with rawhide straps for hinges. A drop-bar secured it, and he filled the pipe he had bought at Miller's Mercantile Emporium with roughcut. At last he hunkered down in front of his hut to rest and smoke.

Tiredness lay heavily upon him, and his long-muscled back ached. But he was filled with an oddly satisfying sense of accomplishment. Later, he built a low-flamed fire and cooked coffee and ate beans from a can. He finished his meal with a can of peaches, spearing them with the long blade of his

knife, munching them whole, letting the sweet juice trickle down his throat. He drank the liquid from the can last of all, and by then his hunger was satisfied and his coffee was ready.

In the still mountain coolness of the evening a man walked into the gulch. Involuntarily Hart withdrew from the fire, then caught himself and moved back slowly. Duke Kelcy grinned at him.

"Reckon you'll do," he said, approvingly, taking in the hut. He squatted down by the fire. Hart poured him coffee, and he spooned sugar into it. "You can tell a man by his works, goes the old saw, an' damned if I ain't found it true. I like a man who can work almost as much as I like a man who knows how to fight."

Hart remained still. Kelcy drank his coffee with a loud smacking of his lips. "You'll be runnin' test-holes tomorrow. You might try both sides of the ridge goin' in two feet. Sometimes a man finds a pocket where water's banged against rocks leavin' a deposit of color. When it happens you can turn a thousand dollars worth of gold in a square foot of ground."

"Thanks," Hart said and relighted his pipe with a twig from the fire. He offered Kelcy his tobacco pouch and the other man filled his corncob. He lighted up, puffing deeply. "I'll try it that way first."

Kelcy nodded and waited a moment, then said: "Funny thing about a gold camp. Talk gets around. Drifts like smoke on the wind, only it don't thin out as much as it goes." His eyes narrowed. "Word has gone out that you've been marked by Grieve and Gruber. Don't reckon that means much. A blind man would know they'd hate your guts. Normally I wouldn't put much stock into talk like that, but these aren't normal times. More than one draw like this one holds a dead man's bones."

Hart frowned into the fire. "These things happen," he said softly.

"That's true enough. But Nevada Gulch is a real strike, and

miners aren't the only ones to come a-runnin'. Now we'll see Thunder Rock take it's turn, fillin' with gamblers and harlots, dance-hall women who'd steal pennies from a dead man's eyes. And the outriders, claim-jumpers, bushwhackers—they'll have a field day. I've seen it happen before. I was in Montana in Alder Gulch. Never had the luck there, but I saw it all. It wasn't pretty and it got rough. The Vigilantes hung thirty men or more includin' Wes Plummer. But before the miners organized there was hell to pay. It could happen again, here. There are some of us who mean to see it don't. It's been bad enough with the likes of Grieve and Gruber walkin' free as the wind an' to hell with those who don't like it. But it will grow worse before it gets better. It's always like that." He grimaced. "Most men will take a hell of a lot before they get killin' mad an' strike back—an' fellers like Plummer know that. They all figger they'll only go so far an' then quit. But they never do. There'll be blood spilled in Nevada Gulch."

Hart said: "It is always the same. A man takes care of himself."

Kelcy looked sharply at him. "You've been marked by Grieve and Gruber and they'll take their time. They want to make an example of what will happen to you. The word has gone out that you are to stand alone. Until now that's the way it's been."

"Until now?" Hart lifted his head.

Kelcy nodded. "There are those of us who know about these things and want to stop them while we can. You will not be alone. We will speak openly of this and Grieve and Gruber will hear it."

Hart frowned. "To what end?"

Kelcy shrugged. "It won't stop them, but it may hold them in check for awhile. That's something because time is on our side. There are five thousand miners in the gulch now and a hundred or more a day pourin' in. When they must they will stand together."

"When they must," Hart repeated. His smile was grim

as he hefted his long-bladed knife in his hand. "I still say it's up to a man to take care of himself. Just the same I hope the time does not come that it's necessary either way."

"Amen to that," Kelcy said, grinning. He stood up and stretched. "I'll see you tomorrow. G'night."

Hart finished his pipe, knocked out the dottle and stuffed the pipe into his pocket. For awhile he squatted beside the fire, staring into its red depths until they blackened. Then, still restless, he walked up to the head of the gulch and climbed to the ridge. From there he could see the dark length of Nevada Gulch, the countless fires that burned on the slopes of it, the massed glitter of the lights of Thunder Rock far below. Dimly he caught the turbulent sounds of the town, muted by distance, echoing across the silent hills.

He found a low boulder to sit upon, and refilled his pipe. In the depths of the narrow draw below he saw the last red flickering of his fire. Loneliness was a part of the night closing him in, and involuntarily he thought of the woman Lou Winters. Under different circumstances—he stopped the thought abruptly. His wry smile bent his lips. He had long ago made the decision that dreams were a waste of time, no matter the strength of their appeal. It was too late to change now.

It was very late when he returned to his hut and laid his length upon the yielding pole-slats of his bunk. Although fatigue seemed to fill him, he did not sleep for hours.

The next day Hart sank his test-holes, running them across the bottom of his claim and up the far side of the ridge. He worked methodically, stripping the top soil to a depth of eight or ten inches, then made little dumps of the coarser subsoil beside each hole. He quit at noon and built his fire and cooked his coffee. He ate from a can once more and smoked his pipe. When he returned to his diggings, he carried a bucket and his gold pan. He filled the bucket with the coarse soil from a hole near the center of the gulch, then made his way out of the canyon and down to the creek. He removed his shoes and socks, rolled up his trousers

legs and moved out into the icy cold stream. Squatting in the water he began his task of washing the dirt, swishing it around, spilling gravel from the edge of the pan, leaving the black sand in the bottom. There was a trace of color—no more.

Duke Kelcy made an appearance before Hart had finished working the first bucket. He studied the color Hart had turned. He grinned. "Maybe six-bits in that one," he said, cheerfully. "But it doesn't mean a damned thing. I'll give you a hand." He had brought his own pan and helped to go through the rest of the bucket of soil. They did better toward the bottom of the pail. The bucket of dirt had held about two dollars worth of gold.

The next bucket did better. It was dusk when Hart called it a day. He had panned better than twenty dollars in gold dust and nuggets. Duke Kelcy grinned at him.

"Maybe I should've given you my claim and staked this one myself," he said. "But you'll need a better rig than a bucket. Go into town and get yourself a wheel barrow. You can haul a half-dozen bucketsfull with a barrow each trip. If it pans out good, we'll run a flume down from above and build you a sluice box. But that's a hell of a job if you don't hit better color."

Hart took Kelcy's advice and went into Thunder Rock that night. The steady stream of traffic had increased. The far cry of "*Gold!*" brought men a-running, Hart thought. Most of them would be disappointed, few would ever strike it rich, and those with average luck would pan less gold than they would make at a job back home; but still they came, drawn by the strength of the dream of sudden wealth. It was a crazy passion Hart thought wryly, but one that could not be rationalized away. It was common to all men—even himself.

At Miller's Mercantile Emporium, which seemed to have expanded with cluttered goods overnight, Hart bought a wheel barrow and an elkhide gold pouch. He dumped his day's tailings from the tobacco can into the new pouch and

used some of the gold to pay for his purchases. Although it seemed foolish to him, he derived pleasure from it.

It was full night when he returned to the street and the kerosene flares made ragged patterns of yellow light in the moonless darkness of the gulch. Restlessness stirred in him, and Hart looked twice at the Faro Queen, then shook his head and walked back up Walker Street. An enterprising man had opened a butcher shop in a vacant lot and a crudely lettered sign read: *Fresh-killed beef. $1 a pound.*

It cost him three dollars for two thick steaks. He paid for it with gold. The butcher grinned. "Make a strike?"

Hart shook his head. "That's most of a day's work," he said ruefully.

"You'll do better," the man assured him and turned to a waiting miner. Hart walked on up Walker Street. The lights of Thunder Rock dimmed behind him. The road was busy, the cold night air clogged with the dust of passage. Loneliness assailed him as he left the road where it crossed the creek and continued on up the trail toward his diggings. The glow of a lantern in Kelcy's tent was a reassuring blob of light in the pitch-blackness of the gulch, and he walked toward it.

"Man had fresh beef for sale," Hart said. "Brought you a steak and one for myself."

Kelcy got up, stretched. "You brung the meat—I got the rest of the makings. Sit a spell. I'll do the honors."

The miner made the meal, refusing any help. He cooked the meat over the open coals of his fire, and they ate in silence, finishing the meal with more coffee and canned fruit. Silvery moonlight was spilling into the gulch when they finished and lighted their pipes.

It was a moment that returned something to Hart he had almost forgotten he had lost; there was a strong warmth to being there, sitting quietly with another man, without bitterness or hate to stir and bind you. Twice he looked intently at Kelcy, and the second time their eyes met and held, and something passed between them unsaid. And Hart

was grateful for Kelcy's quiet acceptance of his friendship.

Kelcy said, quietly: "Men are damned fool animals, fightin' and sweatin' their hearts out for a trace of yellow dust. It ain't as pretty as some colored rocks I've seen, it don't weigh a hell of a lot more n iron, and sure as hell's bet it ain't as useful as a lot of other things." He grinned widely. "Just the same it can make a man's dreams come true if he finds enough of it."

"And if he lives to take it out with him," Hart added, thoughtfully. "I've been thinking over what you said yesterday."

"Aye," Kelcy agreed. "That's that. My rule is, play poor, walk small, stay alive."

Silence fell between them, and they both enjoyed it and the sense of companionship that was unspoken between them. It would grow stronger, this invisible bond, or it would die entirely. No man could be sure at first which it would do.

"A man's dreams," Hart said after awhile. "What're yours, Duke?"

The big man frowned into the dying embers of the fire. "They ain't as big as some, I reckon. But they mean just as much to me. I want a place of my own to live in, and when the time comes, to die in. Plenty of grub for my wife and kids, a fancy rig to drive 'em to church on Sundays, all the clothes they need—and enough left over to buy things you don't need but mean so damned much to folks like us. No more turnin' down the lamps at night to save coal oil, no scrimpin' to buy things for the kids come Christmas, fancy doodads for my wife to primp with." He smiled warmly. "Like I said, they ain't as big dreams as some. But what's your reasons for being here, Hart?"

The question caught Caven off-guard. For a moment he paused, then shook his head slowly. "That's the hell of it, Duke. I have none." And somehow the warmth of the moment seemed to have gone, and he was aware of the old hardness growing stronger once more inside him.

As if he sensed this and somehow understood, Duke Kelcy

left it at that, and after awhile Hart returned to his shack in the gulch. He was tired from the day's labors. But more than that he was caught in the web of his own making, disoriented by the decision that kept him here without a goal to set his mind to. He climbed the ridge and stared again at the lights that dotted Nevada Gulch. Every man there had his reasons behind him, solid footing to keep him going, something to return to someday . . .

Hart shut the thought away, and returned to his shack. He laid down on his bunk and his mind began to sort into order the things he would do, the things he would have to buy or build. He was thinking of the problem of the flume to bring water into the little gulch when he fell asleep.

He awakened from a dreamless slumber as a sharp report sounded and something crashed into the shack. The jar of it shook him to full wakefullness. The sharp report came once more, and he knew it at once as the biting, hungry cracking of a heavy-calibre rifle. He was not the only one to note the exposed position of his brush-walled shanty from the ridge above he thought bitterly. Even as the thought struck home the rifle thundered again and the leaden slug smashed through brush to strike one of the uprights of the bunk.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Hart Caven came off the bunk moving fast. The rifleman would be taking his time, confident that Hart must either leave the hut by the doorway or remain inside for the searching bullets to eventually find him. Either way he was dead, Hart thought bitterly. As an echo to the thought the rifle slammed, and a bullet ripped through the brush of the sidewall to strike the board cupboard he had made. Canned goods exploded to the floor as the cupboard-box tipped sharply at the impact of the leaden slug.

For a moment Hart held there balancing the odds against

him. Then his bitter smile slid into place. He crossed the room to the back wall as the rifle barked again. The bullet struck an upright and whined away into space. Using his knife to slash the brush, he forced his way through the back wall of the hut. There was another unhurried shot, placed a few feet away from where the previous shots had struck. The rifleman was picking his time and place to put the shots. Hart held there, breathing deeply. Something flared, then thudded against the brush walls of the hut on the far side from him, and almost instantly flames shot up the side of the structure. Red light danced out flooding the narrow draw, and in the same moment Hart was running up the steep embankment, legs churning against the giving sand. He fell prone as the rifle chattered savagely. Bits of flaming brush flew under the impact of the lead.

Using what cover the brush offered, Hart worked his way up the steep side of the draw, drew himself over the ridge and lay still. The light from the flaming hut filled the small canyon, made a red glare on the low-lying ground mist that rose from the creek below. Hart heard men yelling further away. He slid forward, came up to hands and knees. The rifle whanged in the darkness off to his right. The gunman was still firing into the draw. Avoiding the thicker brush, Hart worked his way toward the spot. He made little or no noise. There was only the soft pad of his bare feet and the sound of his deep breathing.

The ground mist lay in puddles of gray, thicker where brush grew, stirring lazily to the soft mountain breeze. Little more than waist-high, it blanketed the quiet earth. The man-noises of the gulch were deadened by it, remote. Hart stepped on, then halted. He must be close now. There was a metallic clicking sound just ahead of him; the sound of a bullet being levered into the firing chamber of a rifle. Had the man seen him or sensed his coming? Hart froze there as the rifle blasted again not ten feet from where he crouched.

The gun clicked again. Hart caught the sounds of a man shifting position. Then Hart moved forward again into a

thickening mass of mist that swept up before him, blinding him. He almost walked into the rifleman. The dark figure bent forward, peering into the fire-reddened draw. The heat of the burning hut below lifted the haze, sucking more forward to the ridge, building a wall of this vapor that writhed and twisted.

The rifleman saw Hart at the same instant. A startled cry tore from him and he swung about. In the reddish glow as the mist dispersed Hart saw Al Midlan's thin white face. The Denver gambler's mouth was twisted, and as he brought the rifle up Hart dove beneath it. The shot blasted in his ears, then Hart was in and under, driving forward, bringing the long blade of his knife into play. It bit ruthlessly home and this time there was no evading it. Midlan sagged at the middle, screamed once, a high-pitched, bubbling outcry, then fell face forward.

Brush cracked sharply down the ridge, and a cautious voice sounded. "Caven?" Hart straightened. The ground mist lay thick about his legs, obscuring the prone body of the man he had killed.

"It's all right, Duke," Hart answered. "I'm here."

Running feet pounded, then the lank figure of the miner came clear. He carried a double-barrelled shotgun in his right hand. He almost stepped on the body of the man on the ground, then draw back hastily.

"My God, this was faster than I thought," Kelcy said.

Hart shook his head slowly. "This is not a part of that. It is the end of something else."

Duke Kelcy said nothing but bent to turn the dead man over. The hut was flaring high now, the flames shooting the level of the ridge, burning away the creek mist. After a moment Kelcy straightened.

"I don't know him," he said. "But all killings have to be reported to the Miners' Committee. No question about it, though. A man has to defend himself."

Hart knelt to drive his knife-blade into the soft earth again and again to cleanse it. He restored it to his belt,

straightened up slowly. "There is that," he said. "But sometimes a man wonders why. Midlan could have forgotten it. He might not have found me. But it didn't work that way. There is a pattern to these things that never seems to break."

Kelcy stared into the draw where the flames of the blazing hut were dying down. "You will have to start over again," he said. "But not tonight. I've extra blankets. You can bed down in my tent. I've got a piece of tarp we can use for the body. Pete Abram's a religious man; he'll say a few words when we bury him tomorrow."

Hart followed Kelcy in silence back down the ridge.

The District Miners' Committee met in Thunder Rock the next morning at Halsey's Livery Stables. A group of five men stood apart, two to either side of Duke Kelcy. Some forty miners appeared, and several minor squabbles about claim boundaries were settled before Duke rapped for order on a plank laid between two nail kegs. Silence fell.

"All right," Duke Kelcy said. "Let's get this over with. A man named Alvin Midlan was killed last night while attemptin' to shoot Hart Caven. Seems like Midlan was bearin' a grudge on account Hart here showed up his crooked card game in Denver. This was the second time Midlan made his try—this time the damned fool got stuck for his pains. I say good riddance. Anybody got anything to the contrary to say?"

Somebody in the crowd of men said, wryly: "Just wish to hell he'd stick a few more—an' I'd be willin' to give him their names!"

A laugh went up, and Duke Kelcy lifted one hand for silence. "All right, then. The Miners' Committee of the Whitewater Mining District has met and found Hart Caven acted in self-defense in the killin' of said Alvin Midlan, an' is hereby resolved of any an' all blame for said act. Let no man forever say otherwise. All right, boys. Court's adjourned."

He rapped on the plank again with the wooden mallet.

Three or four men stopped to shake Hart's hand while the rest headed for the nearest saloon. Duke Kelcy and the four men of the Committee joined him.

"Hart Caven," Duke said. "Meet Jen Holt, Ralph Cernak, Dean Camber, Orrie Welsner."

Holt was lean, with enormous hands and a grip like iron. Cernak was a blond, his face reddened by weather and sun who smiled politely and spoke with a thick accent. Camber was a quiet, remote-eyed man who nodded somberly. Orrie Welsner was small, bowed of leg and brown of face. He grinned.

"Howdy, pard," he drawled. "Reckon I could add a few names to those Jonesy was willin' to give you."

"That goes for all of us," Duke Kelcy said. He was frowning. "Got some news this mornin', Hart. Holt here was in Denver yesterday. The Territorial Commission has named John Lesley Cabe, Sheriff of this district." He said it flatly, without inflection in his voice.

"Then you'll have law and order," Hart said.

Cernak laughed shortly. "Any bets?"

There was ill-concealed doubt in the faces of the others. "Cabe will have his chance to straighten things out," Kelcy said.

Orrie Welsner shook his head. "Yeah. Maybe he'll do somethin' about Joe Vosnick's claim that was jumped last week by a couple of Gruber's friends. We'll see."

"Yeah," Jen Holt said, dubiously. "We'll see. I'm like Cernak—anybody want to bet?"

The discussion ended there and Hart returned to the draw with Kelcy. He spent the rest of the day rebuilding his burned shack, moving it further up the small canyon and close to the gully wall on one side. He dug into the bank at the rear of the structure and built his bunk in the niche. It gave some protection, both from the weather and from the possibility of a second attempt on his life from the ridge. It was dark before he finished, and he ate supper with Kelcy and spent the night with him. He finished his hut the fol-

lowing day and made a trip into Thunder Rock for more supplies. He returned to his panning that afternoon and found the older boy [illegible]. He panned out [illegible] these [illegible] with little [illegible], then [illegible] a [illegible] gulch from the side of the canyon. That evening Keley came up to his fire.

"I'm going to cut in," Hart said thoughtfully. "Make a thirty-foot run. Maybe I'll find enough color to make it worthwhile going deeper."

Keley nodded. He squatted before the low-burning fire and puffed on his pipe. "You're due for some luck," he said, quietly. "But it's work."

The next morning Keley appeared to help Hart make his cut. He worked beside Hart until noon, gave him a hand stripping the topsoil from the run. They panned a wheelbarrow load that afternoon, and the color ran good. Keley grinned.

"Better'n a hundred dollars at a guess," he said. "There's your color, and it should get better before it pans out. It runs like that."

The cut that Hart had made ran up to the base of a burned-out alder stump. He considered cutting the run shorter, then decided against it and started to dig out the stump. The roots were as thick as a man's arm and ran out several yards beyond the trunk of the tree itself. It was late afternoon and Keley had long since returned to his own claim when Hart's shovel grated harshly and the dirt he turned was streaked with bright yellow. For a moment he stared down without understanding. Then his legs began to tremble. Excitement raced through him, and he dug like a madman, caught in the sudden fierce exultation of a real gold strike. He laid bare the deep roots of the tree and found closely packed about it a pocket of yellow ore, some nuggets as large as his thumb. It was dark long before he had emptied the pocket, and he worked by lantern light the last hour. When he quit at last his excitement had dulled with fatigue, and he stared down at the three-quarters filled

bucket that rested at his feet. It required the strength of both his arms to lug the bucket back to his hut, and his back ached to the strain of the weight. He returned for the lantern, washed up and sat on the rude bench he had made and smoked a pipe before going inside.

He held the lamp over the bucket of gold. At a conservative estimate, he had taken from the pocket more than twenty thousand dollars in gold in one afternoon's work. He felt he should be exultant, but the gold-fever that had driven him to exhaustion had burned away, leaving only a dull calmness. He grinned wryly, shook his head, then knelt to scoop up a handful of the yellow grains, let it trickle back. Leaving the bucket to sit where he had dropped it, he climbed into his bunk, boots and all, and fell instantly into deep, untroubled sleep.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lou Winters awakened suddenly in the darkness of her room. For a moment she lay still, then stirred and placed her cupped hands behind her head. The sounds of the night drifted through the open window across the room, the muffled voices of men, the tromp of feet along the boardwalk, the heavier thudding of horses in the street, and once the shrill grating of an ungreased axle as a freighter rolled past headed up canyon. The breeze from the window was pleasant on her face after the heat of the day, and she felt at ease but not rested. The fierce determination that had driven her so hard these past few weeks had ground slowly to a fine edge, and for a panicky moment she felt almost that it was failing her.

She sat up, swung her slim legs from her bed, stood up and crossed the room to a deal table and lighted the lamp that stood upon it. The yellow and red glass shade filled the room with warm color, and the richness of the room was reassuring in these moments of doubt that came

so often. Here on the newly-completed upper floor of the Faro Queen saloon she had lavished her attention; months after wagons had brought in from Denver the furnishings she had ordered. There were heavy curtains and drapes at the windows. Rugs covered the plain board floor. Her closets were filled with dresses, and every pair of her slippers had heels of solid silver. It was all a mark of what she had attained in the weeks she had been in Thunder Rock, in the weeks her partnership with Miles Gimpler had prospered. Even more than that, it was tangible evidence that her ambition was being realized.

She frowned and crossed to the ornate dressing table that sat against the far wall. The broad mirror above it reflected the entire room and an imposing array of cut-glass perfume bottles caught the light with their prisms. She sat down on the plush-topped bench and studied herself in the mirror; there were tiny lines about her mouth and eyes that made her frown. For a moment she regarded herself impersonally, the softness of her hair as it fell about her slender throat, the deep color of her eyes. Then she abruptly shook her head and swung away from the mirror. This discontent that filled her was not concerned with what she had accomplished, nor with herself. This much she could admit. But no more.

There sounded a quiet rapping on her door, and she turned to face it. "Yes?" she called out.

"Just me." Miles Gimpler's deep voice answered. She moved to the door, opened it and stood to one side to let him come into the room.

For a moment he regarded her, admiration in his eyes, then a smile bent his mouth. "Woke you up?" he asked. She shook her head and he said: "Glad I didn't, but I had to talk to you for a minute."

He walked past her to a chair beside the deal table and sat down. The soft light of the lamp brought out the highlights on his round face, strengthened the underlying hardness.

"Trouble, Miles?" she asked.

"It could mean trouble," he said, and his smile thinned away. "It could mean anything. I don't know. We've done well here in Thunder Rock, I give you that. You've earned it. I never thought an honest house could get rich: I was wrong. In a year, if the camp lasts that long, we'll both be wealthy. Thunder Rock will be putting in reservoir mains, there'll be a park and a grandstand, and men looking from it. There's no more of a railroad coming into Denver, more than idle talk, but the odds are six to one it will be graded out before snow flies. If it comes, this whole District will continue to boom. They've freighted in a stamp mill to New Deal. That means they've trimmed out the placer beds and blossom rock and they'll be digging for refractory ores soon. There'll be a smelter just outside Nevada Gulch next year. If it comes—and it looks that way now—Nevada Gulch won't be a flash in the pan like so many gold diggings. The camps, including Thunder Rock, will grow. This country has never been mined properly, but it will be. That's the good side of it." He paused and puffed on the cheroot. It glowed redly and puffed out blue smoke. He studied it with his unreadable eyes.

"And the other side of it, Miles?" she prompted.

His frown deepened and he carefully avoided her eyes. "I would ignore the other side of it if I could," he said, flatly. "I can't. But it isn't up to me. This has been your show, and you've done well. I know what I would do—but you've proven me wrong before."

She waited for him to go on, and he took his time, building his words in his mind before he spoke them, laying them carefully one upon another to form a solid picture, as if to convince himself as well as her. "There are two things. This is a rich camp and where there are riches there are parasites. You and I are parasites in one sense, Lou. By another light we provide decent amusement and excitement where neither would exist otherwise. You take your choice, depending upon whether or not your conscience bothers you, I guess. Mine doesn't. I'm not sure about yours. But we

won't matter, one way or the other. The other parasites will. They are highgraders, claim-jumpers, robbers, thieves and murderers. You know as many of them as I do. And they are increasing. They are getting bolder. There is a reason for that, and that brings us to the second thing. John Lesley Gabe. He is Sheriff of White Water District by order of the Territorial Commission. He is John Law himself with murder in the holster he wears at his waist. He carries the whip, and he will use it—and there isn't one damned thing to stop him."

"I know all this, Miles," she said. "How does it concern us?"

"It does, believe me!" he returned, sharply. "I've waited as long as I can. I can't put it off any longer. It isn't a group of outlaws working against each other, snatching what they can. It is a smoothly operating machine that has been built by one man. There will be no large shipments of gold from this camp that won't be known of in advance; no miner can hope to get out of the gulch without being waylaid. It is that bad now—and it will get worse. It comes slowly; I've seen it happen before. Nothing can stop it but the miners themselves, and they will take too much before they are driven to fighting back, if they ever do. I have been told the time has come to choose up sides. We can take our chances—or we can pay up to the man who is running the show. The price is twenty-percent of our take."

She half turned away. "And what do we get for that?"

He studied the glowing tip of the thin black cheroot. "Not one damned thing," he answered savagely. "We'll be left alone by the gang. We'll have no trouble in the Faro Queen and our gold shipments will reach Denver—maybe. But some changes will have to be made. The Faro Queen will have to be run wide open, and we're to do as they say. Let their shills work our tables, let them watch who wins, who comes and goes."

Her face was pale and set. "They?" she asked.

He ground out the cheroot and stood up. "Just one man. John Lesley Gabe, the golden-haired marshal. The tall man

himself. He throws a longer shadow than most other men, and it will grow bigger. It will stretch before him as far as a bullet will carry and it will darken the whole gulch."

She moved away, then turned to come back and face Gimpler. "What happens if we don't play it Cabe's way?"

He shrugged, then laughed grinly. "Run or fight. Either way John Cabe wins." His face was strained, the hardness blocked by something weaker inside him that held sway for the moment.

She saw that and met Gimpler's eyes levelly. "He's just another man, Miles. Anybody can buy guns—and men to use them."

He stiffened, looking closely into her eyes. Then he shook his head slowly. "It won't work, Lou. I'm not that kind of man. When John Cabe looks at me I feel a cold wind on my face. When I look at the gun he carries, I feel sick inside."

"You're not the only man to feel that way." Lou Winters said slowly. "I knew a man in Dodge like that. His name was Holliday and he was a dentist dying of consumption. He would walk a block and then have to stop and rest. His hands trembled badly, and I've heard him say the very sight of a gun made him sick to his stomach. But no one bothered him after he killed three men in one night. He carried a sawed-off shotgun slung from his shoulder under his coat. Everyone knew it. I never saw it, never saw him touch it. Just the fact he had it slowed other men down. They walked soft and spoke soft when they were near him."

"My name isn't Doc Holliday, Lou," Miles Gimpler said, harshly. He was breathing hard.

"No, I guess it isn't, Miles," she answered soberly. She moved away from him toward the window. She parted the curtains and stared down at the dark street below. "I'm not a man. I can't fight John Cabe in a man's way. Do what you have to do, Miles."

Miles Gimpler stood there staring at her, then his jaw tightened. "All right," he said, his voice oddly taut in the silence of the room. "All right, Lou. We will see. Maybe

you will cry at my funeral." He turned then and crossed to the door, went out into the hall and closed the door behind him.

The woman stayed by the window watching the steady traffic of the street, her face set in hard lines. *That's the second time I've done this to him,* she thought. *He will fight now. He will have to live up to what I expect of him.* She felt no triumph, no lessening of the doubts inside her, only a strange certainty that she could do nothing else.

"I *will* win," she said softly to herself. Her right hand clenched the lace curtain, gripping it hard. *I will walk the street and men will lift their hats and bow, and the women on their arms will hate me, but they will smile, too. I've hated them and their smug respectability. But it is all that matters to me. I will have what they have--and more.*

The thought she had expressed was all the security she had, and she must cling to it. There was nothing else for her. Nothing else. For a moment she stood there tensely, then she returned to the plush-covered vanity bench and began to comb her red-gold hair.

When Miles Gimpler closed the door behind him, he rested one thick shoulder against the frame. *Damn her,* he thought angrily. *She drives me, taking everything, giving nothing.* He closed his eyes, let her face build up in his mind, the deepness of her hazel-green eyes, the hard force within them. The promise of something any man would fight for the chance to win. The promise, for him, of the woman's strength behind him forcing him on. He knew the latent power within himself, had seen evidence of how the woman could force him to use it. It surprised him, frightened him in a way. It was uncertain yet, but she would develop it, make him become the man she needed.

He smiled suddenly. He shook his head in small wonder at himself, at the new-found and perplexing depths to himself. Still smiling, his face carefully bland, he went down the stairs to the main room of the Faro Queen. It was busy, al-

though it was still early. Men stood at the bar, sat at the tables, and above their din the piano jangled noisily. Gimpler was aware of these things, but his eyes went instantly to the tall, lean figure of John Cabe where he sat alone at a table against the far wall. Gimpler studied him for a moment, then crossed the crowded room and took an empty chair and sat down.

"You take your time, Miles," John Cabe said in his dead-toned voice. His face behind the drooping yellow mustaches was almost skeletal.

Gimpler felt the cold menace of the man, but kept his smile in place. His thick hand didn't shake as he drew a cheroot from his brocade vest and lighted it. He said: "I always do."

"It's a habit that could make trouble for you," Cabe returned and leaned slightly forward. "I'm tired of waiting, Miles. Let's stop the games. One word—yes or no. I think you're smart enough to know which one."

"I thought so, too," Miles Gimpler said slowly, then shrugged. "In one word since you want it that way—the answer is no."

Cabe's face didn't change for a moment, then it broke as his rare smile flashed. His chair scraped back and he stood up, still bending forward, his face close to Gimpler's. "All right, Miles," his dead-toned voice said flatly. "The woman has you really under her thumb, hasn't she? In a way I don't blame you." Cabe's colorless eyes crinkled at the corners. "Enjoy yourself, because you're as good as dead."

Miles Gimpler took a deep puff on the cheroot. His smile required hard effort. He said, gently enough: "You're the doctor."

The way he said it stopped Cabe. He turned back, placed both hands on top of the table as he leaned forward. His smile was gone. But oddly enough there was something in his colorless gray eyes that reassured Gimpler. It was fear, plain and unmistakeable. Gimpler's smile came easier.

"There is a little story I want to tell you, John," he said.

"It wasn't long. It starts just over a year ago in Hays City when a man rode into town. No one knew him. He killed three men in a street fight—and suddenly he was well-known. He said his name was John Cabe. He was elected sheriff. That was the beginning. But there was one funny thing about it. Until that day in the streets of Hays City, John Lesley Cabe never existed. I am sure of that because a man with a talent for killing like he had would have been known—unless he was careful to make sure he wasn't known. And what better disguise is there than a prominent—and completely different—identity? This was just a few months after the war had ended. Amnesty had been granted the guerillas with Quantrell except for the few diehards like Jesse who wouldn't come in. But there were men to whom no amnesty—nor quarter—would ever be offered. The men who served under Henry Wirz at Andersonville. Men like Farley and Thaddus—men like Doctor Leo Dolman who liked to watch men die in agony."

John Cabe's eyes were narrowed slits. His reddish face had paled.

Miles Gimpler kept smiling. "There was a twenty-five thousand dollar reward for any of the three of them, dead or alive. It still stands. But that isn't the thing that frightens them—the two of them that are still alive. It's the men who came out of Andersonville Prison, remembering them. Like the man who caught Farley and killed him. The man who would walk barefoot through the coals of hell to get his knife into the man who innoculated his kid brother with dirty creek water instead of smallpox vaccine. You saw him in Denver, John—and you saw death in his face. I saw your eyes, and I read the fear in them. Not even that sure-death gun you carry can be depended upon to stop a man like that, can it, John? And Hart Caven is here in Thunder Rock—here in the gulch."

John Cabe straightened slowly, his hands falling limply to his sides. Miles Gimpler laughed. John Cabe looked at him then. His face was expressionless, a death mask of ivory-

back skin. But the fear in his eyes burned even brighter. He turned and walked slowly away, never looking back at him. The crowd closed in behind him and Miles Gimpler stopped laughing. He closed his eyes. His whole body was trembling. His face was wet with sweat, and he mopped it away with his kerchief.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Toby Bell eased his back against the boulder set in the steep wall of the canyon through which passed the road to Denver. It was past noon, and he had been there for four hours. He shook his head angrily, and for the hundredth time picked up his rifle, climbed to his feet and made his way to the top of the boulder from where he could see the road as it angled sharply up the canyon. A veil of dust hung across the middle of the pass, and through it plodded a slow-moving freighter's wagon.

"Damn the luck, anyway!" Toby cursed savagely. That damned freighter *would* have to put in an appearance right now. Well, there was no help for it; the freighter would have to go past before the stage showed, or the stage would roll on unstopped and John Cabe would chew Toby out good. The thought made the outlaw's bearded lips draw down in a snarl.

"Big man," he muttered. "Too damned big for his britches. Him an' that goddamn cannon he packs. It ain't even a white man's gun."

He lounged there, occupied with his bitter thoughts until a wild cry brought him alert. Above the slowly moving freight wagon appeared the stage, rolling fast. He saw the thick-set figure of Bill Wadden on top, using brake and whip with his usual abandon. The stage swung wide to pass the freighter, the horses running free. Toby's frown deepened. There would be time, but damn it, he would have to act fast! He half-slid, half-tumbled from the boulder, landed on

his feet, and went down the steep slope at a run. He hit the road, dropped to one knee and brought up the rifle. He heard the screech of brakes, the leather whanging against steel tires, and he put one shot over the driver's head.

The stage slewed halfway across the road with the frantic efforts of the reined-in team to slow its forward plunge. Bill Wadden was standing erect, cursing, fighting the team to a stop. A man's head thrust out the open window of the stage and his frightened cry: *"Holdup!"* was echoed by the slamming thunder of a pistol. The deeper voice of the rifle answered, and a man leaning from the coach jerked back inside, his revolver falling to the dust of the road.

"File out of there—all of you!" Toby yelled.

The stage door slammed open and three men came out, fighting each other to be first to obey. One of them gripped his upper right arm where Toby's slug had struck him. His face was pale and sullen.

"Dump it on the road and be fast!" Toby demanded. "You —Wadden, kick that damned box down here!"

Bill Wadden nodded, and bent to lift the small iron-bound box. He dumped it over the side. It struck the dirt with a solid thud.

"All right—roll to hell out of here!" Toby thundered, and accompanied the demand with another shot. The three men sprang aside as it raced passed him, then returned to the road to gather up the pokes the men had tossed there. He dragged the strong box by the handle off the road to a clump of bushes. The thudding sound of hoofs sounded close-by, and he crouched down as the freighter came in sight. It rolled past him, the wheels screeching against the wooden-block brakes as the heavy weight of the ore fought to race on.

The driver was sitting tense on the seat, staring about him. Trying to locate where the shots came from, Toby thought. He grinned. A cloud of dust settled down thickly as the freighter moved past. When it was gone Toby moved further back from the road. He waited five minutes to get the freighter out of the pass, then shattered the lock on the

strongbox with five well-placed bullets. There were sixty-odd leather pokes inside, all duly tagged and labeled with the owner's name, address, and amount. The total ran to nearly three thousand dollars. Toby grinned to himself and carried the gold back up the slope to secure his horse second. He stowed the leather bags of gold one and one in his saddlebags then swung aboard.

For a moment he considered the possibility of riding out of the hills. With the money he had he could go a long way. And he had no fear of being caught, but there was more money easily to be had in the Territory, and it was a lure that would hold him there. Grinning to himself, he put his horse to the steep canyon slope and the trail through the hills back to Thunder Rock.

Toby rode carelessly at ease. He felt no great alarm when the sudden pound of hoofs echoed behind him. He turned lazily in the saddle to consider the three men, obviously miners, who spurred up-canyon after him. It was only when the foremost shouted and brandished a long-barrelled revolver that alarm struck Toby Bell and he dug in his spurs—and then it was too late. Three guns spoke in a ragged volley, and Toby's horse shuddered beneath him, fell in midstride, hurling the outlaw forward over its lowered head.

He was sitting up, both hands to his bloody face, shock still holding him when the three men dismounted and surrounded him.

"What the hell is this?" Toby demanded.

The first man spat to one side, wiped his mouth with the back of his left hand. His right hand held a heavy Colt trained on Toby's chest. "You've had your dance, feller—now you're goin' to pay the fiddler. Jake Kimball drove his freight wagon past up an' give us the word. We're from the Law An' Order Committee—an' robbery's punishable by hangin'."

"Here's the gold in his saddlebags," a second man called out.

The first speaker grinned maliciously. "Reckon that does it up brown, Hiller. On your feet. There'll be a Miner's Court convened in Thunder Rock tonight—you'll hang in the mornin'."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The passing weeks for Hart Caven were a blur of days of hard work, and he found himself to be his own greatest problem. It was a puzzle he could not resolve. He had used the blinding urge within all men for gold to break the grip of that other urgent call to vengeance, and found both slacking their hold upon him. It left him oddly content, and for a man of his temperament that was a dangerous thing. For the first time he could think of Davey and not feel the insane demand to pay back the men who had killed him. And somehow he was ashamed of being able to do it. It drove him to seek out new patterns of understanding of the things about him, the many men he knew and saw.

Set into the clay bank of the niche at the rear of his hut he had dug out a hole. There he placed his accumulated gold save for a half-filled poke he kept with him, minding Kelcy's cautioning. A piece of tarpaulin covered the hole, and he had carefully worked clay into place over it. It would require the most painstaking examination to find, and he felt no desire to uncover it for himself.

Travel up the gulch had steadied to a constant stream. Men muddied the creek with the passage of their horses and mules. Hart had joined with Kelcy and two or three other men to run a flume down from the upper creek along the wall of the gulch. He had built his own flume from there to his claim. It took a week's work to complete his sluice box, but it lessened his work by more than half. He could dump his ore into the sluice and turn in the water from the flume to wash away the dirt. In the riffles below he could catch the pay dirt, cleaning them out once a week.

The days shortened, and in the early mornings the ground was white with hoar frost and there was ice scum in the water bucket. The night winds grew colder, and Hart cut sod and piled it against the brush walls of his hut. On the creek and on the slopes of the gulch, other miners were beginning their preparations for the coming winter, and the incoming stream slackened and disheartened men started leaving for more promising fields.

Duke Kelcy spent much time with him, and Hart found a growing affinity between them, a mutual respect and liking that he could trust. And this trust, by its very nature, marked a change in him that he could recognize if he did not understand it.

"A man wasn't intended to be alone," Kelcy said late one fall afternoon. When he is, he does too much thinkin' an pretty soon he's so mired in his own trouble he doesn't know whether he's comin' or goin'. Me, I've never been like that. Seen Edwin Booth in a play once where he says you got to bind your friends to you with hoops of steel. Rest of the play was pretty good, but that kind of stuck in my craw. First-off I kind of figgered that it meant you had to hang on to 'em come hell or high water—then I seen it different, that by *bein'* friends you're linked with hoops stronger than steel. I liked that idea. Still do."

Their eyes met across the open fire in front of Kelcy's tent. Hart had come out of the draw that afternoon to talk. There was a mutual agreement and their smiles came swiftly.

"Winter's coming," Hart said, studying the fire with brooding eyes. "You'll be going home soon, Duke."

Kelcy nodded. He narrowed his eyes as his glance swung about the gulch. "That I will. It's gettin' colder mornin's. I can't wait too long, but I want to take out what I can—I don't want to ever have to come back. When a man finds his luck, he'd do best to work it through, because it won't come again." He stopped to relight his pipe while he studied Hart's face. "There is one thing that troubles me, though.

Jim Steele tried to get his dust out last week—he gave it to a teamster hauling through to Cheyenne. Man name of Porter—he was killed up by Stinkin' Springs. Steele's dust was taken. Then last week John McGreer's claim was jumped and McGreer badly beaten. These things are happenin' too often. The roughs are havin' their own way too much of late. I don't believe in signs an' tokens an' such, but a man'd have to be blind not to see what can happen to any of us. That's way I'm askin' you to see that Martha gets my gold—just in case."

He pulled an envelope from his shirt pocket. "Here's my home address. Martha an' the kids are there. I've got a son I've never seen, Hart. First boy in five tries."

Hart took the envelope. "You know where my gold is, Keley went on slowly. "Reckon that's it. If I could return a like favor—"

Hart shook his head. "There's nothing behind me, Duke."

There came a clatter of hoofs up the gulch, and both men came to their feet. It was late afternoon, and dark shadows filled the wide canyon. A horse came up at a run, the beating sound of its passage thrumming from the echoing hills. The rider wheeled the horse in toward their fire, and his yell reached them:

"Miner's Court—tonight! They caught the rough who held up the Denver stage. We'll hang the bastard!"

The horse plunged on. Hart saw other men come from tents, straighten from their long-tom rockers and sluice boxes to stare after the messenger.

"Now it begins," Keley said quietly.

"Does it?" Hart asked. Their eyes met.

"We will see. You will come, Hart." Keley's face was serious. "There must be an end to these things, and men who will not back down. I want you with me."

"I'll come," Hart replied slowly. The harsh angles of his face stood out sharply as he stared down the canyon. "But it will not work. I've seen it tried before."

"Men must pull together," Duke put in. "I've seen this in

you before, Hart. I do not approve of it. I can't honestly say I even understand it. The roughs have marked you plainly, and I don't know why they haven't struck at you. But they will sooner or later. You make too much of a mark against them. They can't afford to fail to bring you down. Your safety depends on the men who stand beside you."

"No." The word was torn harshly from Hart's lips. "I'll take care of myself. There is a way to these things. I have travelled it before. If you press hard enough, it will resolve itself to one man to stand against you. There is no help for you. It is each man against a dirty world striving to pull him down. I'll fight back in my own way."

"And lay more men in their graves because of that ugly knife of yours?" Kelcy shook his head half sadly. "There is no softness in you, Hart. We know each other well, but we have not spoken of this. But there is a truth you have not learned—that there is a time when every man needs his brother to stand beside him. That time will come to you, when you are humbled in your strength and must ask help of another." The hard-rock man shook his head. "We will speak of this again another time. Now we shall see what we shall see."

It was evident that the word had spread like wildfire as Hart and Kelcy made their way downcreek. When they reached the road where it swung across the creek, it was jammed with miners. They spoke their minds, loudly and defiantly—as long as they were together, and as long as no one faced them down Hart thought. His smile was bitter.

Men jammed Walker Street, hung from the upper windows of the new frame hotel which had been built in the brief weeks since Hart had come to the gulch. Traffic had come to a standstill, although now and then a rider forced his way through the edges of the crowd. A loud shout went up as Kuke Kelcy was recognized, and Duke raised his hands in greeting.

"Where's the prisoner?" he demanded.

A small, thin man answered sharply: "Over here, Duke."

Hart recognized Toby Bell. The big outlaw stood with his back to a hitching rail, his hands secured behind him to the railing with a leather thong. There was a livid welt across one side of his bearded face, but he kept a careless grin in place on his mouth.

"Tough luck, Toby!" somebody yelled.

Hart heard the outlaw's laconic reply: "The hand ain't played out yet."

"Hello, Marvin," Duke said and shook hands with the small, dark-faced man. "Hart Caven, this is Marvin Miller who owns the Emporium."

Hart shook the small man's hand. Miller's voice was deep-toned. "We've got some luck with us. Jabe Green's an attorney, and he'll be acting as judge. He's agreed to do it. There ain't much doubt what we'll have to do. Bell was caught red-handed. This time we'll do something about it."

"Time we made a start," Duke agreed. "Let's get on with it."

Jabe Green was a portly, big-bellied man who was sweating profusely. His hand when Hart shook it was trembling, his eyes were frightened. But his voice when he spoke was even and strong. The man was holding himself in tight control, and he would not break or back down Hart decided.

"There is Territorial Law," Green said loudly, but was instantly shouted down.

"To hell with that!" a man shouted loudly. "The legislature ain't got aroun' to doin' away with our Minin' District Courts, so it's legal—an' I say hang the son of a—"

Other shouting voices joined in the clamour. Hart watched Toby Bell's face. The outlaw noticed his attention and winked deliberately. The man's standards of life were his own, but he would not betray them. Hart respected him for it.

A horseman moved through the crowd. His manner was insolent and he kept a leering grin on his face. It was Curly Grieve, and he wore a silver star on his open vest. "You men are takin' a hell of a lot upon yourselves," he protested mildly.

Marvin Miller was beside Hart. "It will lead to injury," he said. "John Cabe named Curly his deputy yesterday. Thieves ride our streets wearing the badge of lawful authority."

"You better leave, Curly," a man shouted hoarsely. "We got enough on rope stretchin' as' ready."

Grieve's smile twisted, and his bright eyes tried to pick out the speaker. He shrugged. "It's your own damned funerals," he said. He took his time turning his horse. His eyes caught Hart's, and his smile slid away. Then he dug in his spurs, and his horse surged forward. Hart had to leap aside to keep from being ridden down.

"The damned fool!" Miller bit out. The crowd of men closed in behind Curly's horse.

A wagon was wheeled up in front of the saloon, and a section of the street in front of it was roped off. Toby Bell was lifted into the bed of the wagon. Jabe Green climbed up beside him, followed by two or three other men including Duke Keley and Marvin Miller. Hart moved back through the crowd.

He spoke to men he knew, heard others speak his name. The fight with Grieve and the killing of Al Midlan had marked him. He gauged the sentiments of the crowd easily enough, but his doubts remained with him. By the time Green started his accusatory harangue, Hart was on the outskirts of the mob of men.

The trial began with the selection of a jury. It was quickly accomplished. Fully a hundred men offered services. It was Hart's guess that there were a thousand miners in Walker Street, clogging it from side to side. He made his way back through the crowd to the wagon. Duke Keley bent over the side to speak to him.

"It's beginnin' to move now," he said. His face was sweating.

Witnesses were introduced; the three men who had caught Toby Bell identified him. Green held both hands over his head.

"You all know what we're here for." So identical. The nervousness about his eyes was gone, Hart noticed. The lawyer was warming to his work. "This man is a symbol - a symbol of lawlessness. There isn't a man within sound of my voice - there isn't a man in the whole gulch - who doesn't know the truth. We've been robbed, brazen, bestial robbers have been jumped. It isn't safe for my to get your gold out of the gulch. Nearly everyone of you has buried what gold he has to keep from losing it. It isn't safe to carry ten dollars on your person here in Thunder Rock. Despite the Territorial Commission appointing John Cabe as Sheriff of this District there is no law but what we make and enforce ourselves. And by the rules of this mining district, thievery is **punishable by death."**

A wild shout rang out. "Hang the bastard an' get it over with! I'm gettin' red-eye thirsty."

There was no defense, although one man yelled half-heartedly: "Give him another chance. He ain't killed nobody **yet."**

He was quickly shouted down, and the case was given to the jury. They retired to the nearest saloon. The mob churned restlessly, several loud harangues were made by self-styled leaders. Duke Kelcy leaned over the side of the wagon.

"They're comin' out!" he called. "Now we'll know."

The jury filed through the mob, lined up in front of the wagon. The foreman, a heavy-shouldered man named Wheeler handed up a slip of paper.

"There's your verdict," he announced loudly. "*Guilty as hell!"*

A wild cry went up. The crowd surged forward. Faces streaming sweat. Duke Kelcy held up his hands, lifted his deep voice in a shout. "Hold it, damn you! We're not a mob **—we'll do this right an' legal!"**

The shouting died away, and men stopped their forward movement. Wheeler said: "We all signed the verdict. Now I'd like to ask for a show of hands from the crowd."

"All right," Kelsy shouted. "You all heard him! Do you agree with the verdict of the jury?"

There was no doubting the feeling of the mob of miners. Kelsy looked at Hart and grinned. "That does it," he said. Hart read his lips, for his voice was lost in the triumphant yells of the crowd.

A man climbed into the wagonbed with a length of new rope. He waved it over his head; the nine-looped hangman's knot was already in place. The other end of the rope was thrown over a projecting timber of the saloon. Hart saw Toby Bell following the rope with his eyes. Then the outlaw closed them and his mouth twisted awry. The man with the hangman's knot moved across the wagonbed toward Bell. A dozen eager hands were grasping the loose end of the rope, ready to haul Bell's body aloft.

There came a movement behind Hart and he turned. Horsemen came through the crowd. In the van rode John Cabe, his drooping mustaches veiling the ironic set of his wide mouth, his pale eyes intent, gauging the temper of the crowd. Beside him rode Curly Grieve, grinning broadly now. Four other men Hart did not know rode with them. They all carried sawed-off shotguns across their laps.

The rowdy cries subsided. The crowd parted to give them passage to the wagon. The man holding the rope had reached Bell, placed the loop over the outlaw's head. Bell's face was pale, but he was smiling, waiting for the turn of events.

"All right, men!" John Cabe's deep voice intoned somberly. "This has gone far enough. I don't want you men doing something you'll be sorry for tomorrow. I don't know if Toby Bell is guilty or innocent—but he'll get a fair trial in Denver."

"The hell he will!" one angry man shouted. He stood to the stirrup of Cabe's horse, head lifted. "You'll damned well see to it he never reaches Denver or a trial either by God!"

John Cabe's right hand moved down and up and down again, a flow of motion so practised the details of it would

escape a casual look. The long barrel of the marshal's strange gun slashed downward in a single, chopping, buffaloing stroke. The man who had protested so bitterly fell into the dirt of the street. The gun swept up instantly, moved restlessly to cover the crowd.

"I'm the law here," John Cabe stated flatly. His voice carried in the abrupt silence that fell. "You will remember that."

The man he had buffaloed stirred and groaned and sat up, holding a bloody head in his hands. John Cabe glanced down at him, his mouth curling in a smile. "Grieve, take him with you. Thirty days for interfering with an officer of the law."

Hart saw Duke Kelcy then. The hard-rock man was leaning forward, his face set and hard. The men were waiting for him to speak. For that matter, for any one of them to speak, to stand up to John Cabe and his queer gun. They had the strength to force their will; but John Cabe's iron manner held them in check.

Cabe waited a moment longer. Then his revolver went back into the sheath that lay across his thin thighs. "All right then, it's all over. You—with the rope! Turn the prisoner loose. Bell—there's a horse here for you. Get on it."

Toby Bell took time for one long, close look at the men who stared up at him, then climbed from the wagon. No one moved to stop him. Hart felt Duke Kelcy's eyes on him. The hard-rock man needed him, needed his strength, and if he spoke now, it would not be too late. But the bitter hardness inside Hart kept him silent. A moment later the opportunity was forever gone, and Toby Bell was mounted, wheeling his horse about.

The proudly arrogant features of John Lesley Cabe stood clear, the lamplight setting off his yellow mustaches and long yellow hair. His sneering smile marked his face, then he turned his horse and rode back the way he had come, his men following him. The crowd parted before them, filled in behind them. Curly Grieve's jeering laughter rang out

through the silence, then was lost in the quickening drum of hoofs.

The mob of men instantly thinned. In a moment half of them were gone from the street, and within five minutes the street was almost deserted. Duke Kelly still stood in the wagon-bed. He looked once at Hart then turned and jerked the rope free.

"We won't be needin' this," he said, hoarsely, then laughed bitterly. "The joke's on me, Hart. I thought I had the guts to see it through—but I melted like butter when John Cabe faced me."

"You are no worse than the rest of them," Hart said, quietly.

"They would have followed where I led," Duke returned. "To hell with it. I need a drink."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Toby Bell was the last to dismount at Ron Kleiber's shack, and when he did so there was a weak trembling in the back of his knees. Curly Grieve's coarse laugh made his back stiffen.

"Scared back there, Bell?"

Toby let his eyes fix to Grieve's broad-featured face and he nodded. "Scared to death," he said flatly. "Now it's been said once—that's enough." The bite of his voice sobered Curly's expression.

"Curly meant nothing," Jerry Gruber put in quickly.

"Forget it then," Toby said. The tall, spare figure of John Cabe moved up to them. The star on his open vest glinted dully.

"Now they know how it is and it will not happen again," he said. "I promise you that, Toby. I keep my promises."

"All right," Toby answered. "Now I know, too. But it was cut too close."

"I agree with you," Cabe returned. He seemed in a

jubilant crowd. "But it was a necessary thing. A showdown was coming. Now it is over and done with."

They moved into the shack. A lantern was lighted, and a bottle was set out on the table in the middle of the room. Ron Kleiber moved away. "I'll take care of the horses," he said.

Toby poured a stiff drink and emptied the glass in two gulps. He set the glass down and his hands still trembled. "All right," he said. "Now what?"

"Now nothing," John Cabe replied, smiling. "You stay here under cover for a couple of days. Do nothing. Relax and enjoy yourself. Play poker with Ron. He'll try to cheat you. You'll try to cheat him. Just don't kill each other."

"Then what?" Toby persisted.

Cabe met his eyes evenly. "Then—nothing. I want you to show yourself. I want them to see that we can laugh in their faces. If anything is said—I'm waiting for formal charges to be made against you. There'll be none made. A taste of the whip will do the gulch good."

"A whipped dog will fight back sometime," Toby said. He poured another drink. "You outfaced them—this time. I give you that. But there'll be another time. Something will set them off."

Jerry Gruber said: "I agree with Bell. Kelcy started this. He's dangerous."

"Then he hasn't tasted the whip hard enough himself yet," John Cabe stated flatly. "Never let a dog see you're afraid of him, and he'll always back away from you. Kelcy needs a lesson. I'll let you give it to him, Toby. You should enjoy the job, because he was damned well set to hang you tonight."

Toby Bell licked at his mouth. The weakness in his legs seemed worse. In the moments he had faced the anger of the crowd something had been burned into him. But he could not show it here. Strong as his fear of the aroused anger of the miners, his fear of the yellow-haired man waiting

for his reply was stronger. He nodded slowly and said: "All right."

John Dabe bent his head in a swift gesture of approval. "That's better. It's all settled then. We will continue as if nothing had happened. Do you see the effect it will have on the gang? A touch of the whip—they'll understand it, and they'll bow down to it."

His tall, lean form moved toward the rear door, paused there. "You can only hang once, Bell. No matter what you do, you can only hang once. You will see to it that Duke Kelcy does not bother us again."

His colorless eyes held those of Toby Bell. He was waiting. Toby fought against the tremble of his hands and poured another drink. "All right," he said again. "All right."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hart Caven had finished his meal of fried steak and potatoes and was draining the last of his third cup of coffee when the man approached him. Hart had spent three hours in the early evening at the Lucky Streak Saloon, and his luck had been in. He had won a hundred dollars at the faro table.

"You Hart Caven?" the man asked. Hart had never seen him before, but the stamp of the professional gambler was on him, from the plain dark suit to the thin black line of mustache that lay across his upper lip.

Hart nodded. The man said: "Lou Winters wants to see you." Then he turned and left the restaurant.

Hart took a cigar from his shirt pocket, wet it between his lips, rolled it in his hands, then lighted it. His eyes narrowed with thought. He built a picture of the woman in his mind, surprised at how easily it became clear. Then he shook his head and stood up. He laid two silver dollars beside his empty plate to pay for his meal, then went out to stand on the boardwalk.

After the excitement of the trial that afternoon, the town

had quieted. There were few men on the street, and only a scattered procession of wagons rolled downgrade. *Maybe just making the try burned them out,* Hart thought bitterly. Then he shrugged and pulled his heavy mackinaw down him. The night wind was cold with the place smell of snow in it.

Duke Rekas would be going home soon, and he would leave a job unfinished behind him. It was not Rekas's fault that he lacked the vital spark that would make men follow where he led. Some men were set apart from the rest, marked by leadership—or dangerousness like John Lesley Cabe. Hart's eyebrows drew down, narrowing the space between them. John Cabe and the hostility that lay between; John Cabe and the murderous weapon that he carried. The man and the strange gun were inseparably linked in Hart's mind. He shook his head.

The woman had sent for him; the thought persisted in his mind. He had deliberately avoided seeing her for weeks, staying out of Thunder Rock for that reason. His reasons, even to himself, were unsatisfying. He was aware of the driving force behind her and understood it. Some things had been too long a part of his own life for him not to recognize it in another. He understood the diamond-hard strength of it that could not be broken, but must wear away.

The cigar tasted suddenly bitter, and he threw it into the dust of the street and turned and walked down the boardwalk to the big false-fronted Faro Queen. The quiet that held the rest of the town did not rule here; he caught the loud roar of men, the tinkling jangle of a piano. Tar Barrels flamed along the broad front of the place sending yellow-red flames up into the cold night air. He pushed through the first set of swinging doors, took his turn getting to the bar. He had his drink, paid for it, and left the bar to cross to the far wall.

A girl was dancing up on the small stage. The men yelled and clapped when she finished. She danced out to the center to blow them a kiss before hurrying off. A comedian came

out in a tattered remnant of a Confederate uniform, limping along with the help of a knobby cane.

A waiter came by, carrying a tray laden with schooners of beer. Hart stopped him. "Where's Lou Winters?"

The man jerked his free hand over his shoulder, thumb thrust out. "Upstairs where she belongs I reckon," he said, and hurried off.

Hart made his way to the rear, past the busy faro and poker tables. The calls of the dealers made a droning sound, oddly flat and low of pitch. There was a door past the end of the bar, but a burly man with the mark of a bouncer blocked the way.

"Where you headed for, mister?" he demanded, truculently.

Hart gave the man his name. The burly man nodded. "Okay, go on up. She's waitin' for you."

Hart opened the door and went down the hall toward the stairs. He went up them, came to a landing. There was an open door to the left. Lamplight came into the hall from the room beyond. Hart walked to the door, rapped on the casement.

There was movement in the room beyond, then Lou Winters appeared. She was wearing a pale blue dress, and the lamplight glistened on her high-piled red-gold hair. Her light-hued eyes met his openly, and then she smiled slowly.

"I really didn't think you'd come."

"Why?"

"Because I sent for you." She moved one hand and stepped back. Hart followed her into the sitting room. He blinked. His eyes moved about the room, taking in the furniture, the pictures on the walls, the rich curtain and drapes. How many years had it been since he had been in a room like this? It made bittersweet memories stir inside him.

She sat down on a satin-covered settee. A lamp on a table beside it made a warm glow across her white shoulders. She

smiled at him. "But let's not quarrel. I told you once I liked a man with sand. I haven't changed my mind."

He studied her in silence. The harsh lines about her mouth had eased. Her skin seemed pale without makeup, but she appeared younger. He shook his head. "I wouldn't say that. Everyone changes."

"Even Hart Caven?" she asked.

"Even me. In a different way."

"No, you won't change," she said. She looked away from him. "That is the thing between us. Neither of us will ever change. I am sorry for that."

She stood up. She was close to him. He put out a hand, touched her, then without a warning it was coming, desire struck at him. It was a long pent-up, denied expression even in his thoughts, and all the more terrible now for that. He caught her, pulled her to him. His mouth claimed hers, harshly, passionately, and for one brief moment his own passion stirred an answering fire in her. Her arms held him, her long-nailed fingers digging into his back. Then as quickly as it had come to her, it was gone, and she went slack in his arms. He kissed her again, meeting her eyes. Then he released her and stepped back. His hands were trembling.

"I asked for that," she said, bitterly. "You would think that was why I sent for you. But I'm no school-girl, Hart, panting after any man."

He stood very still. "Do you want me to say I'm sorry?"

There were low, angry flames deep in her light-hued eyes. "I don't want you to say anything, Hart. Just get out. And take Duke Keley with you. That's why I sent for you —to see he got home safely. What happened this afternoon hit him hard. He's been drinking ever since. He thinks he let the miners down. They let *him* down. They're like you, afraid to lean on anything or anybody, standing alone until they're cut down, one by one. Now get out of here."

She crossed to a door on the far side of the room, and opened it. Through the opening Hart saw a bed and a man's

figure crouched across it. The woman crouched, her face impassive, as he bent over the prone man, lifted him first to his feet, balanced him there, then draped him over his right shoulder. Her eyes met his while as he carried the unconscious Duke Kelcy from the room. She paused before him to open the door to the hall. He went out and the door closed softly behind him. It was the sound of a woman's muffled crying. Then he turned and went down the hall to the stairs.

Men followed Hart's laden figure with their eyes as he walked through the Faro Queen, but none spoke to him and none followed him outside. He gained the boardwalk, hoisted Kelcy's inert figure higher on his shoulder and set off up the street. By the time the town was behind him, Hart was breathing hard, and when he paused to rest, Kelcy stirred and sat up with a groan. He blinked uncertainly at Hart, then grinned.

"Rough night, matey," he said slowly, distinctly. "Lash down for a storm." His eyes closed and he pitched face forward until Hart caught him, boosted him back erect on the boulder where he had dumped him. It was a struggle to get the drunken man back on his shoulder, but Hart made it at last and started off up-canyon again. He was wet with sweat despite the coldness of the night when he reached Kelcy's tent. The gulch was quiet, the night bright with starlight, frost glinting on the short clumps of bunchgrass. Two or three lights gleamed through canvas walls up the slopes of the canyon, and somewhere a dog howled mournfully.

Hart got Kelcy into the tent, rolled him onto his bunk, removed his boots and threw blankets over him. Duke stirred once then.

"I'll be home soon, Martha, and I'll never leave you again," he said gently, then lapsed into raucous snores. Hart bent to leave the tent and straightened again outside. The sweat on his body made him shiver as the cold winds struck against him. Walking rapidly to keep warm, Hart made his

way to his own canyon, up the rude path he had made, past his sluice boxes to his hut. Still he did not go in, but climbed on up the canyon to his favorite promontory there to stand very still gazing back at the lights of Thunder Rock.

His thoughts were vague, restless. The events of the long day crowded against each other for consideration, but always they gave way to memory of the woman's face, the remembered warmth of her lips against his. When at length Hart Caven returned to his hut and his bunk it was to toss sleeplessly for hours.

Duke Kelcy was by the hut early the next morning, face haggard and ashamed. "I'm a damned fool, Hart," he said. "I ain't a drinkin' man, but there's times--" He shrugged expressively. "You'll be one of the few to understand me, Hart. I respect you for it. And for totin' me up canyon on your back. Anybody else would have left me to sleep it off in the street like I deserved."

"Any man's entitled to make a fool of himself once in a while, Duke," Hart returned smiling. "Only some of us overdo it. I'm speaking for myself."

"Then you have the satisfaction, at least, of knowing you're not by your lonesome. I'll be gettin' back now. I'll feel better workin'."

Hart watched him go, then returned to his own diggings. The day was grayly overcast with racing streamers of gray cloud riding high over the painted hills. In the clear, filtered light the gulch looked washed-out, the canvas-walled tents dingy and dirty. There was a steady exodus of miners leaving the gulch in two's and three's. Those who had had little luck were seeking new fields before snow flew. There was the smell of winter in the air, and that night Hart was grateful for the tiny belly stove he had bought from a departing miner earlier that month.

A feeling of waiting filled the gulch. There were occasional meetings of the Law and Order Commission in the days that followed, but Hart attended none of them. Duke Kelcy spent the evenings with him, and the hard-rock man

was unusually serious. The issues of the trial had set hard with him, but he never referred to it. There came a night, late in September, when he said:

"I'm leavin' the gulch, Hart. Friday night. I'm goin' to bed soon as always only I'm pullin' up stakes after midnight. I'll beat the roughs that way. I've got a horse corraled out over the ridge. I won't be ridin' through the gulch at all. I'll ride north for Cheyenne direct, and I should make it inside a week, ridin' easy. I'll be gone before anyone knows it."

Despite his hard control, a strong sense of loss struck at Hart, but he smiled. "I'll wish you luck, Duke," he said.

They talked very little that night, Kelcy smoking his pipe in silence. He knocked it out at last and stood up. "You've been a good friend, Hart. I've enjoyed knowin' you. Bein' a damned fool like always, I've got some advice for you: Find yourself a woman—forget your past and settle in. It ain't hard when you make up your mind to it. And one last thing—if I don't make it, don't take it upon yourself to square things."

The loneliness of the isolated little canyon struck at Hart after Kelcy had gone. He sat for an hour in front of his dying fire, smoking in silence, his eyes brooding. But when he turned in at last, sleep came surprisingly easy.

He awakened suddenly in the early hours of the morning and sat up listening, not sure what he expected to hear. The wind had grown stronger, was whipping down the gulch in a steady singing clamor. Then, above the sighing of the wind, he caught three sharp reports and a man's yell. There was no mistaking the flat sound of pistol shots, and Hart came off the bunk in a single leap. He pulled on his boots, grabbed his heavy mackinaw and rifle and pushed out into the windy night. It was dark and clear with the bite of snow in the wind. He shivered and held still, trying to catch the sounds again. He saw a light moving past the mouth of the coulee and broke into a run. He came out of the

gully and pulled up. A half-dozen men carrying lanterns were grouped around Duke Keley's tent.

"*Duke!*" the single word was torn from his lips and Hart ran forward. The men about the tent pulled away to let him through. In the light of the lanterns held high he could see clearly and too well what had happened.

Duke Keley lay sprawled in the center of the floor of his shack, his head twisted up, his eyes staring sightlessly at the smoke-streaked canvas roof overhead. His right hand lay outstretched, the fingers queerly twisted and blackened. Against the far wall a hole gaped emptily where Keley's gold had been buried.

"They did a bang-up job on him," a man said, quietly. It was Jen Holt. The blond man was blank-faced, his skin pale in the light. "He lived long enough to tell me it was Gruber—an' he had Curly and Toby Bell with him. We should've hung Bell when we had the chance."

"This is a good time to think of it," Hart said bitterly. He lifted his head. "Get out." Without waiting for them to obey him he knelt, rolled Keley over, placed his limp arms across his chest. The robbers had held his right hand in the open mouth of his stove to make him talk. The hand was charred and blackened.

Hart closed the staring eyes gently, then straightened up. His face was iron-gray rock. He thought savagely: *He didn't have the big dreams most men have—why couldn't he have realized the small ones that meant so much to him?*

The lonely wind sighed outside. Jen Holt was still in the tent, but the others had gone outside.

"Look, Hart—"Holt began.

Hart raised his eyes to him. "Get out of my way," he said. He walked past the miner, stepping slowly. He picked up his rifle where he had left it beside the door. He walked outside into the cold wind. Men moved back from him. He looked at them. "You're a pack of mangy dogs, too goddamned scared to finish what you start," he said, flatly, and walked through them.

He didn't see the men look at each other, then at Jen Holt. The blond man nodded slowly. "All right," Holt asked softly. "What in the name of Christ are we waitin' for?"

Men broke and ran into the darkness, and there was no shouting, no encouraging mob wells to whip each other up. There was no need for them. Hart walked alone down canyon, unseeing, face set and hard; but there were other grim-faced men not far behind him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Lou Winters was standing at the window of her darkened room when there came a sharp rap-rapping at her door. She turned slowly, crossed to the door and opened it. Miles Gimpler stood there. His face was flushed and he was smiling crookedly. He came into the room and turned to face her.

"School's out," he said, bluntly. "In every game there comes a time to pick up your stakes and move on. That time has come."

She held there, puzzled by the intensity behind him. He nodded slowly. "I mean it. I'm not drunk, although I will be before morning. I'm going to drink to the passing of the greatest gold camp of them all, Thunder Rock and Nevada Gulch. Because it's going to be dead by morning. John Cabe's overplayed his hand as I knew he would. Now he'll find out what happened in Virginia City and a dozen other places when the pot boiled over."

"Talk plainer, Miles," the woman said.

The gambler shrugged. "Plain as you like. It takes a hell of a jolt to set these hard-rock miners off—and nothing under God's sun will stop them once they've really started. They need that start—and they need a man to lead them. They've got both now. Cabe had Duke Keley killed for his gold. They burned his hand off to make him talk. And Hart Caven's in town with a rifle and that damned knife he

hers so much. He knows who did it—and Cabe can't make him back down. There will be a thousand miners to back Hart's play."

"Duke," Lou Winters said, and her hardness cracked and was gone. Sudden anxiety wracked her. "Cabe will kill Hart, Miles. You know that."

"He'll try," Miles Gimpler said. "He's welcome to it. Other men have had their cut at Hart Caven."

She tensed. "Where is he, Miles?"

The gambler shrugged. His small eyes kept to her face. "I came here to ask you a question," he said. "There is no need to ask it now. You'll find him—you'll probably succeed in getting him killed. But you'll be doing what you have to do. Me, I'll find another town. There are lots of them. But I'll miss you, Lou. A woman like you only happens to a man once in a lifetime. I'm sorry I'm the wrong man. I'll wish you luck, because with a man like Hart you'll need it."

But she wasn't listening. She ran past him, grabbed up a coat, flung it over her shoulders and ran into the hall. She hurried down the stairs, into the glare and noise of the saloon. Men spoke to her and laughed as she hurried past. Then she was out the swinging doors, into the murky glare of the wind-whipped tar-barrels. Walker street was almost empty. She looked both ways, pulled her coat tighter about her, half ran across the street, then pulled up sharply.

A man came out of a saloon up the street, crossed the boardwalk and turned toward her. He wore no hat, and in the yellow glare of windows his face was lean and dark. She ran toward him, and he saw her coming and stopped.

"Hart!" she called out. "You're alone! Are you crazy? Cabe can muster a hundred men. He'll shoot you down like a wild animal."

Hart Caven looked into her face, then laughed—a harsh, broken sound. "I don't run with a pack, remember?" he said. "Stay out of the way."

He started on past her, but she put up a hand to his chest and halted him. Anger made her sway. "Fight your

right!" she said, bitterly. "Give any man a chance to strike you back. Why don't you go and shoot your life into the street. It's all you're good for, all you were born for—to hate and kill and die alone."

He held those facing lies his eyes unbelieving, almost pitiful, and shuddering coldly. "I don't want it this way, any more than you do," he said, quietly. "Maybe it makes me sick. Maybe I feel churned up inside, but Duke Kelly was my friend. He won't sleep alone."

He walked past her. She wanted to cry out, to stop him, to tell him that she hadn't meant what she had said, that only her pride held her. That if he fell, her life would end with his. But words like that cannot be spoken, and she stood there and watched him stride up the street.

He left the boardwalk and stepped into the center of the street. He held the rifle crooked in his arms, gentling it like a man would hold a child. His back was straight, and the wind pressed savagely against him, ruffling his hair, pulling his open coat away from his lean figure. He halted suddenly. His voice lifted in a shout that ran ringingly down the wind-swept street:

"*Gruber—Grieve—Bell! I'm waiting for you!*"

Silence fell in the saloons. Swinging doors opened and heads thrust out. But the street remained blank and empty. The wind started a dust-whorl, raced it along. Hart turned with queerly stiff steps to face up and down the street.

He shouted again. His voice echoed flatly along the empty buildings, bounced into nothingness as the wind caught it, whipped it away.

Then, further up the street, Lou Winters saw three men step out. She knew them at once. The small Gruber, the hulking Grieve, and Toby Bell. They walked slowly toward the lone figure in the street. She heard Curly Grieve's loud chuckle.

"It's all yours, sucker!" he yelled.

At the same moment a man's deep, penetrating voice called from Hart's right: "*Caven!*" She saw Hart half-turn to meet

that now remain. Then red flames leaped from a doorway across the street from her, sharp, staccato flashes that ripped into Hart Caven, slammed him around, dumped him into the street, his rifle falling unfired from his arms.

Triumphantly, John Cabe stepped into the street from the doorway, his sunburned face grim and bowlike. His smoking gun raised for the make-sure shot.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The instant between the time he heard John Cabe's deep voice call his name and the shots roar out at him seemed an eternity to Hart Caven. He was facing the three men walking toward him. He tried to swing around. He was half-turned when Cabe's first shot rammed through the skirt of his mackinaw, raked living fire across his right thigh. He felt his leg buckle under the impact of the slug, and at the same instant two more shots slammed against his body, one high in his left shoulder, the other against his hip. The whole crazy scene tipped up before him, as if it had been twisted in the grip of a mighty earth-slide, and the ground slammed against him, pitching the rifle from his grasp.

He lay there, shocked and numb. He saw John Cabe step out toward him, then pause, and at the same time a new sound broke the windy silence. It was the low, muttering growl of many men. They filled the end of Walker Street. John Cabe wheeled to face them, his lean gaunt body stiffening. He raised his voice in a shout: "All right, you men! Get out of the street! It's all over!"

A man yelled back: "Not yet it isn't, damn you!"

The men surged closer, walking slowly, without pause, without hurry. John Cabe had been joined by the three outlaws and they stood together, waiting. Hart saw John Cabe smile, slowly and raise his gun to face the crowd. In the garish light of the tar-barrels his striking figure, his yellow-haired handsome face was the focal point of the

whole scene. There was an arrogant pride in him, a certainty of his own powers. With one shot he could break the mob's spirit, make them run from him, and they would never be aroused against him again . . .

Hart twisted painfully, forcing his body to roll. His right hand ripped open his mackinaw, and steel gustened oddly in his hand.

"Look out, boss!" Jerry Gruber screamed.

A gun blasted down at Hart, but he was rolling. John Cabe tried to jump back, to bring his heavy revolver to bear. Hart came up in a single, galvanic lunge. His heavy-bladed knife spun in a flash of silver light that ended at Cabe's chest. At the same instant, Cabe's gun thundered, the center barrel discharged, and a riot of slugs chewed into the dirt of the street.

Cabe's staring eyes protruded as he stared down at the alien thing that had blossomed in his chest. His mouth went slack, and the poise, the arrogance, were wiped away as if they had never been. He was only a small man, acting a part he could never fully portray. And in that last terrible instant he knew it and cried out against it. Slowly he crumpled forward, fell into the dirt of the street.

As if with his fall a spell had been broken, men shouted and surged forward. Guns snapped and thundered. Hart saw Jerry Gruber cut down. Then the miners were running past him. There were screams, yells, roaring, racing confusion. Guns barked crazily, then a man shouted: *"Get a rope!"*

A man screamed like a woman, the sound cut off suddenly as something dark lurched upward at the end of a rope thrown over a projecting porch timber. Hart glimpsed Curly Grieve's swollen, writhing face, then the mob broke and cut off the scene.

Get the rest of them! We'll hang every goddamn rough in the gulch. You all know 'em—burn 'em out!

Arms came out of the welter of cursing, fighting men, caught Hart, dragged him free of the mob. He was aware of a woman, pressed tightly to him, covering him, shielding

him with her own body, and even in that awful moment he wondered at the tenderness of her touch.

Hell blossomed about them. Running feet and cursing men. Another heavy figure jerked upward at the end of a rope, legs pulling, thrashing galvanically. Toby Bell-Hart remembered the outlaw's good-natured grin, and shut his eyes. Doors slammed. Window glass went out with a crash and guns cupped into the crazy night. A red glow caught, grew violently under the driving impetus of the wind.

The woman caught Hart under his arms, dragged him off the street, into an alleyway. He heard her hard breathing, then a light grew about them. Hart tried to sit up. He saw a rude cabin, brown faces peering at him, frightened. Then the woman bending close to him.

"You were right, Lou," Hart whispered. His voice was soft and strange. "I need you. I'll always need you." Then her hand closed his mouth and a welling darkness fell about him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

LONELINESS, black welling loneliness, closing him in, cutting him off . . . Hart stirred. He saw Davey's face, strangely distant, unclear, receding, and Davey's voice, now whimpering with pain, but strong and warm as Hart had forgotten it could be. Davey calling to him from far away: "*Goodbye, Hart!*" Then other faces. Farley, hurtling backwards into darkness and death; Al Midlan screaming as the knife slashed away his life; the grinning, friendly face of Duke Kelcy closing one eye in a wink—then the long, gaunt features of John Cabe, wearing his long yellow hair and drooping mustaches as a part of a role he was playing. Then Cabe without the long hair and mustache to veil his features, the harsh bony structure of them standing clear.

"*Dolman!*" Hart yelled and sat up. Fiery pain lanced through him, jarring him into wakefullness. His eyes opened. A Mexican woman was bending over him, pushing him

backward upon a bunk. Hart relaxed, lay back. He closed his eyes to drive away the last of the dream, then opened them again.

He was in a Mexican hut. There was a smell of cookery in the air. The single room was warm and clean. A brown-faced boy grinned impishly at him. Then the Mexican woman held something warm and wet to his lips, and Hart drank. The warm broth filled him, comforted him.

"*Gracias, madre,*" Hart whispered. He was shocked by the thinness of his voice. Then memory flood in upon him. "The woman—the woman who brought me here?"

The Mexican woman smiled. "Doña Lou will be back, my son," she said, softly. "She has been gone but for a few minutes. All night, for three days she has been with you. But like any woman, you were not to see her at her worst. Clothes and things she needed—but she will return soon."

Hart closed his eyes and lay very still. There was a steady, throbbing ache in his left shoulder where Cabe's—Dolman's—bullets had torn into him. He shook his head. Cabe—Dolman. It made a crazy sort of sense. The posturing character of the frontier marshal had been an impenetrable disguise for a man sought by every law enforcement agency of the Government. And Hart had no doubt now. It was something from a nightmare that stood out with strange clarity.

A door opened and closed softly. Hart tensed. He opened his eyes. Lou Winters was standing over him, looking down at him. Her mouth opened as she caught his look, and she smiled, then bent and kissed him softly on the lips.

"I still like a man with sand," she said, gently. "You'll do, Hart Caven. You always would."

There was a dark smudge across one of her cheeks, and her clothes were torn and dirty. She saw his glance, then shook her head. "They did a good job once they started," she said. "Every saloon on Walker Street was gutted, including the Faro Queen. There was nothing left at all."

"Then that's that," Hart said .

The woman nodded. "They hung nine men. Forty others have their marching orders." Her mouth drew down. Miles said Thunder Rock would die that night. He was right."

A heavy hand rapped on the door. It jerked open and a man came inside. Three others waited for him outside. Hart recognized Jen Holt. The blond man was harsh of face, his eyes sunken blue pools of bright light. He nodded at Hart.

Then he looked at the woman. "I'm sorry, Lou," he said. "It has to be a clean sweep. The Law an' Order Committee's makin' one rule. No exceptions. The stage is pullin' out at noon. It will stop by here for you in a few minutes. Be on it."

He smiled at Hart. "Gimpler's goin' out on the stage. He sent you these." Holt laid Hart's knife and a sealed envelope on the bed. "You need anything, Hart—there's a hundred men will fight for the privilege of seein' you get it." He nodded again and went out, leaving the outer door open behind him.

Hart touched the cold blade of the knife. Then he picked up the letter. The woman watched him as he opened it. It was written in a bold, copperplate hand:

> *My Dear Friend Hart:*
>
> No matter how high the odds run, some men can buck them and come out on top. I knew you had the touch the first day I saw you. I knew you then, Hart, and I knew I never wanted you on my tail again. That's why I've stuck with you. But even a crooked gambler feels the need to level now and then, and this is the time for me. I don't know why. Maybe it's because I'm the biggest damned fool of all. I don't know. But when I ride out of this town and head for another, I want a clean slate behind me. Not that it will make any difference in the long run, but it's fun to think of how mixed-up the record's going to be when I do cash in.

You'll know by now you've won the biggest stake of all. Don't be damned fool enough to risk it again. Close out your game—and for keeps. If that isn't plain, copper your bets by marrying the girl.

Last of all, you'll probably guess sooner or later that John Cabe was Leo Dolman. Which leaves just one more name on your list. I never believed in a split pot—so here's the rest. I knew Dolman as soon as I saw him—for the same reason I knew you. My name used to be Thaddus. Now it's Gimpler. Next town—I don't know. Maybe I'll try Smith. And there'll always be a "next town" for a man like me. I've run so long I can't stop. Maybe I don't want to, for then I'd have to face myself, and even my stomach's not strong enough for that. Now you know. What you'll do about it I can't guess. I won't lay odds. I'll never sleep again thinking about that pig-sticker you love so damned well. But then I haven't slept a sound night in five years anyway.

Some men run with the crowd, Hart. That's me. Slice it how you will. Maybe you can't understand it or why it made me do what I did at Andersonville. I know what I've done better than anyone else. I've regretted it so long the word has no more meaning for me. I've made my own hell. There's nothing you can do to worsen it.

MILES GIMPLER

Hart's hands crumpled the pages, dropped them. His hand went to the knife, then stopped and drew back. He closed his eyes.

Lou Winters' soft voice said: "He told me there was nothing inside you but hate, Hart. That's why he wrote that letter—to prove it to me. It's his goodbye to us both."

Hart opened his eyes. The woman drew back, her face

pale. Her odd, tight smile moved her lips. "It's almost noon," she said. "I'll say goodbye now, Hart."

His hands reached out, caught her. With his movement, the knife fell unheeded to the floor. "It's easy to run—but it's hard to stop," he said. I can't stop alone, Lou. I need your help. Maybe together we can make something new. Let the stage go without you. Face it out with me."

Wheels squealed outside as brakes were applied, and through the open door Hart saw the Butterfield Stage pull up. He saw Bill Wadden's grinning face. Within the carriage he saw Miles Gimpler, lines of strain on his round face. He was watching the door expectantly. Beside him Doctor Erasmus Kline tipped up a black bottle and drank thirstily.

"Always another town for people like us," Lou said softly. She turned and looked down at Hart. "All right, Hart. I've got sand, too. I'll stay."

She waved the stage on, and Bill Wadden whooped to the team. It took out with a jerk. Doc Kline lost his bottle, and his wail resounded. Miles Gimpler's face went blank. Then his shoulders moved in a shrug, and his smile flashed. Wadden's cheerful voice sang out:

There's a Yellow Rose in Texas,
That I am going to see—

The song faded into the distance. The thudding of hoofs and the rattle of the stage died away. The Mexican went outside and closed the door. Hart and Lou Winters were alone, and they needed no words.

For variety and reading excellence, you will not want to miss any of these

ACE NOVELS

S-60 **THE MARSHAL OF MEDICINE BEND**
by Brad Ward
A famous gun-fighter faces the moment of showdown.

S-82 **KILKENNY** by Louis L'Amour
The roving cowboy whose guns were *not* for hire.

S-102 **OATH OF SEVEN** by George A. Glay
A fever-pitch novel of Mau-Mau terror in Africa.

S-111 **THE SMOLDERING FIRE** by Harry Harrison Kroll
The Bloody Breathitts—Kentucky's feudin' hellions!

S-122 **THE PREYING STREETS** by Ledru Baker, Jr.
Exiled gangsters in the hideaways of Naples.

S-133 **ADVENTURES ON OTHER PLANETS**
Edited by Donald Wollheim
The thrills and excitement of distant worlds.

S-141 **BLOOD ON THE BRANCHES** by Oliver Crawford
Lumberjack conflict among the tall timber.

S-143 **A WOMAN ON THE PLACE** by Harry Whittington
Tension in the backlands of the Deep South.

EACH BOOK 25¢

Ask your newsdealer for them. If sold out, the above books may be bought by sending 25¢, plus 5¢ additional for handling, for each title to ACE BOOKS (Sales Dept.), 23 West 47th St., New York 36, N. Y.

Order by Book Number

ANDERSONVILLE was a name no man who wore the Union Blue could ever forget . . . especially those who had been prisoners in the filth and cruelty of that grim death camp.

Hart Caven was one of those men. And he carried a hate in his heart so deep and so violent that he was driven by only one thing — revenge. Revenge for the death of his kid brother — a meaningless death at the hands of three torturers.

The bitter, somber man, who could throw a knife faster than any man around, had to kill these three before he could rest.

But first THE MAN FROM ANDERSONVILLE had to scour the Wild West to find them.

AN ACE BOOK